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UDK 811.111:34 Originalni naučni rad Primljen: 15. 10. 2012. Odobren: 15. 12. 2012.

# STANDARD PRONUNCIATION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

SUMMARY: The problem of pronunciation standards of a given language is certainly a most interesting and important one, and it is surely the first that a person wishing to acquire an acceptable pronunciation of a foreign language has to solve. Exposure to a number of varieties of the foreign language may play an important and useful part in the study, and the question arises as to which of the various forms of pronunciation to choose. As regards the English language, this question is even more serious, for it is a fact that nowadays over 400 million people speak English as their first language. Along with them, millions of others learn and speak English as a second or a foreign language all over the world. The fact that the majority of English speakers use some form of American pronunciation does not make the problem smaller at all, for it is impossible to find two persons belonging to the same nationality who pronounce their own language in the same manner. These differences may result from a great number of causes, such as: locality, early influences, social surroundings and often individual characteristics which may be numerous and different themselves. However, the issue of perfection is not that relevant for foreign learners of English who visit Great Britain, or the United States of America. What matters is being able to understand what they are told.

KEY WORDS: pronunciation, pronunciation standards, language varieties, Received Pronunciation, General American Pronunciation.

When they come to the British Isles for the first time, foreign learners of English are usually hit by surprise and dismay as they discover how little they understand of the English they hear. Except for the fact that people seem to be speaking much faster than expected, the English spoken by great majority of people seems to be different in many ways from what they have been taught. While differences in pronunciation are quite striking they are not the only ones since learners may also notice differences of grammar and vocabulary.

If they are confident enough in their knowledge, foreign learners may think that most of the English people either cannot or do not speak English correctly. Some native speakers may agree with them or even think that they should know better what is correct and what is not, since they have studied the language. However, the question of correctness is not that relevant for foreign learners of English who visit Great Britain. What matters is being able to understand what they are told, be it correct or

not. 'One of the most important things to remember is that *everyone can improve*, even if they have no great talent for language. Quite apart from anything else, there is great satisfaction to be got from the development of what talent you have. You may never sound like a native English speaker, but at least you will have got as close to it as you can.' (O'Connor, 1970: 4).

While they are generally being understood, foreign learners of English will find it hard to understand native speakers for which reason they may happen to think that perhaps the English they have learned back at home was not the "real" English. But this is highly unlikely to be the case. Yet, although the kind of English they have learned is "real" enough, it will tend to be limited to a single variety of the language tailored as a model for their own speech. It will usually be the speech of a particular group of native speakers as is spoken, slowly and carefully, in rather formal situations.

Having all this in mind, it is not difficult to conclude that exposure to a number of varieties of English may play an important and useful part in the study of English as a foreign language. The problem of pronunciation standards of a given language is certainly a most interesting and important one. It is surely the first that a person wishing to acquire an acceptable pronunciation of a foreign language has to solve. The question arises in fact as to which of the various forms of pronunciation to choose. As regards the English language this question is even more serious. It is a fact that nowadays over 400 million people speak English as their first language (Crystal, 1985). Along with them, millions of others learn and speak English as a second or a foreign language all over the world, and this is perhaps why Jones (1969:  $\nu$ ) was very right to say: 'I no longer feel disposed to recommend any particular forms of pronunciation for use by English people or to condemn others. It must, in my view, be left to individual English-speaking people to decide whether they should speak in the manner that comes to them naturally or whether they should alter their speech in any way.' The fact that the majority of English speakers use some form of American pronunciation does not make the problem smaller at all, for it is impossible to find two persons belonging to the same nationality who pronounce their own language in the same manner. These differences may result from a great number of causes, such as: locality, early influences, social surroundings and often individual characteristics which may be numerous and different themselves. It is thus quite understandable that pronunciation of people brought up in Manchester differs from that in case of people from Edinburgh, and both pronunciations differ from the pronunciation of people brought up in London. This also applies to educated people in other countries.

#### What is dialect

Many people in the world take pride in where they come from and it is safe to say that the English are not different. Regardless of what we happen to come across in our later life and how much we travel and change our residence, the place where we grew up and spent our childhood and adolescence bears a special significance. Nowadays,

people travel much more than they used to and quite often they change several residences in their lifetime. Therefore, some of them have a "nomadic" childhood and have not got any ties whatsoever with any of the places they lived in. On the other hand, for a majority of English people pride and interest in the area where they grew up is still a reality.

Where they come from is thus an important part of their personal identity, and for many of them an important component of their local identity is the way they speak – their accent and dialect. The vast majority of people in England speak in a manner that indicates that they come from a particular place. They speak like the ones they grew up with and for that matter they differ from those who grew up somewhere else. The way people speak, of course, may change over time as they shift their residence. Nevertheless, some trace of the way people spoke in the place where they grew up will remain in their utterance all their life. And depending on what they sound like when they speak, or where they come from, people in England may be labeled as "Cockney", "Scouse", "Geordie", "Jock", etc.

Some people have very regional accents, so that a person can tell exactly where they come from if they are versed in spotting accents. Others have fewer regional features and can be placed approximately. 'In the written language the reader is generally left to make up his mind which are the important words, helped to a greater or lesser extent by the style of the author and by such devices as italicization, spacing and the like; but in speech these words are specifically pointed out so that the listener shall be left in no doubt. Words are pointed out by means of what we shall call *accent*.' (O'Connor, Arnold; 1973: 7). There is even a small number of people in England – probably between 3 and 5 percent – who have totally regionless accents. Those are usually the people who have been to one of the big public schools or want to sound as if they have. This kind of accent is usually referred to as a "B.B.C. accent" because readers of the news on the national radio and television are usually selected from this segment of the population.

Still, *accent* is not the same as *dialect*. When we talk about dialect we are usually referring to something more than accent. We are referring not only to pronunciation but also to the vocabulary and grammar people use. For instance, one can say *I haven't got any* and somebody else can say *I ain't got none*. They differ in the grammar they use and therefore they speak two distinct dialects. Of course, dialect and accent normally match. So, if one speaks, for example, Yorkshire dialect, he should normally do it with the Yorkshire accent. Hence, the term *accent* refers to varieties of pronunciation, whilst the term *dialect* refers to varieties distinguished from each other not only by differences in pronunciation but also by differences in grammar and vocabulary.

# Origins of dialectal differences

One very interesting question that linguists and dialectologists sometimes find difficult to answer is where all these dialects come from? Why do people from different

parts of the country speak differently, or why they do not speak the same? As has just been said, the answer is not easy to give as many factors contribute to development of the differences between the ways people speak in various parts of the country. Yet, one of the answers could be that English, like every other language, is constantly changing and that different changes in language take place in different parts of the country. A language change that occurred in one region may spread out to neighbouring areas. Some of the changes may even spread so much as to cover entire country. More often though, the changes will only spread so far as to lead to dialect difference between the areas which have the new form and those that do not.

Natural barriers may also bring the spread of a language change to a halt. One of the most important dialect boundaries in England runs through the Fens, which until recently was an isolated, swampy area which is difficult to get across. Therefore, it is not by pure chance that people in Norfolk pronounce *laugh* as */la:f/* while people in Lincolnshire pronounce it as */laef/*. Norfolk pronunciation is just an example of a language change which could not make it across the Fens into Lincolnshire as very few people made it across due to the obstacling terrain.

Sometimes language change can be explained by reference to external factors. Throughout its history England was subject to many conquests and different conquerors whose languages played more or less significant role in the development of English as we know it. For instance, major adoption by English language of a large number of French words can be accounted for by referring to the Norman Conquest of England by the French speaking rulers in 1066. However, more often than not such an explanation is lacking and we have to get along with the conclusion that it simply appears to be a natural characteristic of human languages that they change – in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary.

The English language, like great majority of European languages, derives from the old Indo-European language. The break-up of the Indo-European language into its more modern descendants gave birth to original Germanic language. As time passed by, different varieties of the original Germanic language drifted apart more and more thus giving birth to modern languages of Germanic family such as English, Dutch, Norwegian, Icelandic, Frisian, etc. The phenomenon that led to this is language change. The same mechanism is at work within English itself. It evolved from the original language that the Germanic-speaking invaders brought about 1500 years ago into Old English or Anglo-Saxon, as written by King Alfred, which is no longer comprehensible today. Then it became the Middle English of Jeoffrey Chaucer, which is still difficult to read and understand. Finally, there comes the kind of English that is used now, with all its more and less subtle differences within.

One can sometimes speak of certain differences between the pronunciation of the old and the young, men and women living in the same locality and being of a similar social position. Individual characteristics in pronunciation by a person may result from habit, fashion, childish mispronunciations (the correction of which has been neglected), some physical defects, and for many other reasons.

### Regional and social variation

The most prestigious dialect of the English language is Standard English, and the most prestigious accent is the so-called R.P. However, only a very small percentage of the population in England speak the R.P. The others have some form of regional accent.

Regional accents are sometimes spoken of as, for instance, northern or southern English, Irish, Scottish or Welsh. But this is not meant to say that there is one Irish or one north-of-England accent. It only means that English speakers in one particular area have enough pronunciation features in common with one another, which are not shared with speakers of other areas. Thus, the term "northern accent" is not more than a convenient label for a group of more local accents.

However small area we look at, we will find differences between pronunciation there and in an adjacent area. Unless there is some considerable obstacle to communication between those two areas, those differences will be so slight that it would be rather difficult to draw a sharp line between them and say that accent or dialect X is spoken on one side of the line and the accent or dialect Y is spoken on the other. In Britain, from south-west of England to the north of Scotland they do not have a succession of distinct accents, but a continuum, a gradual change of pronunciation. The same applies to England itself. There are no sharp dialect boundaries, and dialects certainly do not coincide with the counties. Yorkshire dialect does not suddenly change into Durham dialect as you cross the Durham County boundary. Hence, there is indeed no such thing as an entirely separate, self-contained dialect. Yet, for the sake of clarity and brevity, we divide the continuum of dialects and accents into areas at points where it is least continuum-like. That is, we draw boundaries between dialect areas at places where we find a situation that most closely resembles an abrupt transition. However, we still have to bear in mind that these areas are not particularly firmly or permanently fixed, and that they are actually a simplified approximation of what happens in real life.

Apart from the regional variation in English language, same as in many other languages, there is also social variation. Speakers of the R.P. are at the top of the social scale and their speech gives no clue to their regional origin. People at the bottom of the social scale speak with the most obvious regional accents. Between these two extremes, the higher the people are on the social scale, the less regionally marked are their accents, and the less they differ from the R.P.

Not all people stay in one social position throughout their lives. The ones who climb the social scale will tend to modify their accent towards the R.P. and their dialect towards Standard English, thereby helping to maintain the connection between class and the way people speak. For example, a speaker from Bradford or Sheffield, as he climbs the social ladder, will tend to introduce the vowel /a/ as it is pronounced in R.P. in the words such as *gun*, *stuff*, *crush*, etc. instead of the way he used to pronounce it. But this is not easy since he has to classify all the words containing this vowel into

two groups. What often happens is that some words are wrongly classified. This is known as hypercorrection.

In the view of what has just been said, it is not surprising that there seems to be greater variation in the speech of individual speakers of modified regional accents than in that of the R.P. speakers. In the formal situations, particularly in the company of R.P. speakers, they will not only attempt to make their speech more like the R.P. but also, since they are in fact learners of the R.P., they will speak more slowly in order to avoid making mistakes.

Nowadays, there is not the same pressure as there once was to modify one's speech in the direction of R.P. The fact is that the announcers with non-R.P. accents are now to be heard on B.B.C., important posts in industry and civil service are held by non-R.P. speakers, while some younger R.P. speakers have even adopted some features of regional pronunciation.

## Standard English and R.P.

If we want to describe regional varieties of a language or differences among its dialects, we certainly need some reference point or a benchmark by which we will measure those differences. Describing regional varieties of English, as the reference point we will take the so-called Standard English. Grammatical, lexical and other properties of Standard English are well known and documented. Nevertheless, it is necessary to explain what Standard English *is* and what it *is not* in order to avoid any confusion and to say a couple words about its significance.

Firstly, the important thing to say is that Standard English is not a language. Standard English, whatever it is, is less than a language, since it is only one variety of English among many. Standard English may be the most important variety of English in many ways: it is the variety of English normally used in writing, especially in printing. It is the variety used in the education systems in all the English-speaking countries of the world, and is therefore the variety spoken by those who are often referred to as "educated people". It is thus also the variety taught to non-native learners.

Standard English is not an accent either as it has nothing to do with pronunciation. We have to acknowledge that there is in Britain a high status and widely described accent known as Received Pronunciation (R.P.) which is sociolinguistically unusual in that it is not associated with any geographical area, being instead a purely social accent associated with speakers in all parts of the country, or at least in England, from upper-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. It is widely agreed, though, that while all R.P. speakers also speak Standard English, the reverse is not the case. Perhaps 9-12 percent of the population of Britain speak Standard English with some form of regional accent. It is true that in most cases Standard English speakers do not have "broad" local accents i.e. accents with large numbers of regional features which are phonologically and phonetically very distant from R.P., but it is clear that in prin-

ciple we can say that, while R.P. is, in a sense, standardised, it is a standardised accent of English and not Standard English itself.

Standard English is not a style, since we can use it in both formal and informal occasions. For instance, one can say: *The old man was bloody knackered after his long trip*, which is a sentence told in a very informal style but still in Standard English. Or one can say: *Father was very tired after his lengthy journey*, which is still Standard English but more formal than the former example. But if one says: *Father were very tired after his lengthy journey*, that would no longer be Standard English but perhaps some of the northern varieties of English, as attested by the non-standard verb form *were*.

Now that we know what Standard English is not, we should provide the answer to the question of what it is? The majority of linguists in Britain agree that Standard English is a dialect as much as other dialects are. As already pointed out above, it is simply one variety of English among many. Standard English is however an unusual dialect in a number of ways. It is for example by far the most important dialect in the English-speaking world from a social, intellectual and cultural point of view, and it does not have an associated accent meaning that it can be spoken with a number of different accents. It is also of interest that dialects of English, as of other languages, are generally simultaneously both geographical and social dialects. But unlike other dialects, Standard English is a purely social dialect. Because of its unusual history and its extreme sociological importance, it is no longer a geographical dialect, even if we can tell that its origins were originally in the southeast of England. Standard English is a dialect which is spoken as their native variety, at least in Britain, by about 12-15 percent of the population, and this small percentage is not just a random cross-section of the population. They are very much concentrated at the top of the social scale. The further down the social scale one goes, the more non-standard forms one will find. Standard English is the dialect of educated people throughout the British Isles. It is normally used in writing, at schools and universities, on television and radio, and is usually taught to foreign learners.

Just like Standard English is the most prestigious dialect, the most prestigious accent is the Received Pronunciation – R.P. The R.P. is not the accent of any particular region, although historically its origins may be traced in the speech of London and its surroundings. R.P. is only really associated with England and not the other countries of Great Britain. It is spoken by a very small percentage of the British population, those at the top of the social ladder. Everybody else has a regional accent. Because it is what might be thought of as an "educated accent", it appears characteristically in upper and upper middle class speakers and is more sociologically rather than geographically defined.

Whenever British English is discussed, the accent presented as a model for the learner will almost exclusively be the "Received Pronunciation" or R.P. "Received" here is to be understood in its nineteenth-century sense of "accepted in the best society". Regardless of changes that the British society had gone through over the past century, the R.P. has remained the accent of those in the upper reaches of the social scale as

measured by education, income, profession, title, etc. Traditionally, there have been certain occupations most typically associated with an R.P. accent and they include barristers, stockbrokers and diplomats. Up until the 1970s this was the accent that was required if one was to be considered an announcer on the nationally broadcast B.B.C. (British Broadcasting Corporation) television and radio stations. Hence the term "B.B.C. English".

It has been estimated that only about three percent of the English population speak the R.P. Why is it then taught to foreign learners? One reason is that it is generally regarded as the best and most beautiful of English accents. And no doubt learners want to learn and teachers want to teach the best. There is however another, much more important, reason for it. The R.P. is the most widely understood accent in Britain and those who succeed in mastering it stand the best chance of being understood.

It is quite clear now why it is difficult for a foreign learner to take a decision on the type of English pronunciation he will try to acquire. Although there are various kinds of pronunciation with quite a difference between each other, it is impossible to choose one that is intrinsically "better" and which could be said to be a *standard* one. Daniel Jones and other British phoneticians have found a certain type of pronunciation to be the most useful and most frequently used one. Jones believed this kind of pronunciation to have been based on his own Southern speech and also usually heard in everyday speech of Southern English people educated at "preparatory" boarding schools and the "public schools" – Public Schools in the English sense, of course, not in the American sense. The pronunciation is fairly uniform at these schools and does not depend on their locality. This pronunciation can also be heard from those who do not come from the South of England, but have been educated there. On the other hand, a lot of natives of Southern England who have not been educated at these schools use this type of pronunciation, as well as the majority of Londoners who have had university education.

Jones also believed that the above type of pronunciation was clearly understandable in the most of the English-speaking world. That is perhaps due to the boarding school system prevalent in England with a tradition exceeding 400 years. Besides, people from all other parts of the country were for the centuries past in a situation to hear this form of speech communicating with London in various ways, as London has been and is the centre of political, economical and cultural life of Great Britain. That is why this way of pronunciation is more widely and easily understood in the country. This non-dialectal type of spoken British English is often called *Received Pronunciation* (R.P.), this being a technical term of phoneticians, used for want of a better term. Thus it is to be understood that R.P. means only the *widely understood pronunciation*. Therefore it is not a recommended *standard*, since there are other types of pronunciation considered to be equally "good".

The advantage of R.P. is that it is easily understood by the English-speaking Canadians, in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Even in the United States of America, where there are a lot of varieties of speech, this kind of pronunciation is universally understood. However, although R.P. and its modifications are widely and

easily understood almost everywhere in the English-speaking world, it is used, i.e. spoken, by a small minority of the English speakers. That is why R.P. cannot and in fact should not be considered as virtually better than any other type of pronunciation. In such conditions, therefore, it is impossible to have a standard of pronunciation obligatorily accepted. On the contrary, Jones (1969) considered that people should be allowed to speak as they liked.

Unfortunately, although things gradually change, the English are still particularly sensitive to variations in the pronunciation of their language. The "wrong accent" may still be an impediment to social intercourse or to advancement or entry in certain professions. Such extreme sensitivity is apparently not paralleled in any other country or even in other parts of the English-speaking world (Gimson, 1973).

One may easily believe the above as the pronunciation of English has traditionally been a marker of position in society in England. One regional accent – that of Southern England – had acquired social prestige for the already mentioned reasons and those wishing to advance socially were obliged to modify their pronunciation in the direction of the social standard (Hughes, 1996).

On the other side, however, the famous British tradition is not almighty. One can hardly say today that R.P. is still the exclusive property of a single social class as it has become widely accepted by people of various social strata, particularly due to the radio and television broadcasts. The British Broadcasting Corporation – B.B.C. – chose this kind of pronunciation for its announcers because it had been most widely understood and excited least prejudice of a regional kind (Gimson, 1973). Thanks to B.B.C., Received Pronunciation has become even more widely understood and accepted as the so-called *B.B.C. English*. The R.P. usage has been permanently on the increase and this is probably why it is sometimes, however not officially, called "Standard English", designating, of course, the *Standard Southern English Pronunciation*.

It must be said, however, that for the young today a real or assumed regional or popular accent has a greater prestige. That is why the R.P. can now be even a handicap, sometimes being taken as a mark of affectation or a desire to emphasize social superiority. On the other hand, the elderly traditionally think the speech of the young to be debased and slovenly. All this may be important for the future development of the English pronunciation, but it is too early now to forecast a direction of such a development.

Abercrombie (1965: 10-14) defines the "Standard English" as the official language of the entire English speaking world and of all educated English speaking people. He also maintains that the population of England consists of people who *do* and *do not* speak Standard English. For him Standard English is a language, not an accent. Now, Standard English speakers in England are divided by an "accent bar". R.P. is on one side of the said "accent bar", and all other accents are on the opposite side. Although it is difficult to define how the "accent bar" works, it is quite clear that the R.P. is a Privileged Accent constituting a great advantage in one's career and social life. This is why Abercrombie (*op.cit.*) even compares the "accent bar" with the "colour bar",

and claims that the existence of R.P. is an anachronism in the present-day democratic society.

Despite all above, however, one can easily state that R.P. has become such a form of pronunciation as is generally predominant in all books on the English phonetics. Although the R.P. users have much in common as regards their speech, it does not necessarily mean that R.P. is absolutely uniform. Gimson (1973: 88) distinguishes three principal types of pronunciation within R.P. itself:

*Conservative*: used by the older generation and, traditionally, by certain professions and social groups;

General: used in pronunciation adopted by B.B.C.; and

Advanced: used mainly by young people of exclusive social groups.

Gimson (*op.cit*.: 87) has also classified various pronunciations of the British English according to the regional criteria:

Educated, i.e. educated regional, really meaning highly educated speech; Popular, i.e. popular regional, meaning less educated speech, and

*Modified*, regional pronunciation with characteristics of R.P. adopted to a certain amount. It is very important to note that all speakers do use more than one style of pronunciation, because people pronounce their language under various circumstances. Jones (1960: 13) therefore defined the notable among the several pronunciation styles as:

The rapid familiar style;

The *slower colloquial style*;

The natural style used in addressing a fair sized audience, and

The acquired style of the stage and the acquired styles used in singing.

Jones considered the *slower colloquial style* to be the most acceptable and useful for foreign learners. The said "style" is continually taught to students from European countries who learn English as a second language, while people from Asia and South America use the American English model.

# How to pronounce American English

In the United States of America, English is pronounced in numerous ways all different from the pronunciation used in Great Britain. In some cases, the differences are so great that people can often be heard talking of a separate American language. Most of the American linguists maintain that the language spoken in the United States is only a variant version of the British English.

To be singled out above all is the fact that there is no socially preferred standard of speech in the United States. There is also no geographical standard that could be considered "better" or more acceptable than other ones. There are a great number of

various dialects, and Bronstein (1960: 7) says that 'the speech you use in this country, then, is considered standard if it reflects the speech patterns of the educated persons in your community'. The most important thing for any speaker is to be understood and, consequently, one has to listen carefully to the speech of the educated members of a community in order to acquire the same kind of pronunciation.

The speech of one community is certainly possible to be heard on various levels showing the social structure of the community. All regional areas of the country have their peculiar levels of speech. In general, these are:

*Educated Formal Speech* – formal literary English;

*Educated Colloquial Speech* – colloquial English;

*Sub-Standard Speech* – Illiterate English (speech of uneducated people, unacceptable to speakers of Standard English) (*ibid*.: 9-10).

Being its functional varieties, both *formal* and *colloquial* speeches constitute the *standard form* of the language. Educated Colloquial Speech may be heard in a business conference, at the dinner table and in other everyday situations. It differs from the Educated Formal Speech mainly for the much wider use of unstressed syllables and normal use of contracted forms. This is perhaps the reason why it is even nearer to the "spoken language" foreign students wish to acquire.

Although there is no Standard Pronunciation of the American English, those trying to acquire this model of the language are advised to take the General American Pronunciation (G.A.). This is the speech of the educated people from the Mid-West of the United States of America which is one of the largest dialect areas. Therefore speaking the G.A. in Educated Colloquial Pronunciation could be more useful than to pronounce American English in some other manner.

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# СТАНДАРДНИ ИЗГОВОР ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА

Резиме: Питање изговорног стандарда неког језика свакако је веома занимљиво и значајно, и сигурно је прво које појединац мора да разреши ако жели да усвоји прихватљив изговор страног језика. Изложеност различитим варијететима страног језика може да буде од значаја и користи у укупном учењу језика, а питање које се неминовно поставља односи се на избор једног од бројних видова изговора. Кад је реч о енглеском језику, ово питање постаје још озбиљније у светлу чињенице да данас преко 400 милиона људи говори енглески као свој први језик. Уз њих ту су и десетине милиона оних који уче и говоре енглески широм света као свој други или као страни језик. Чињеница да већина оних који говоре енглески користи неки вид америчког изговора нимало не умањује тај

проблем, пошто је дословно немогуће наћи две особе исте националности које изговарају властити језик на потпуно истоветан начин. Запажене разлике могу да проистичу из веома великог броја разлога, као што су место живљења и употребе, утицаји у најранијем детињству, друштвено окружење, а често и карактеристике појединца, које саме по себи могу да буду бројне и врло различите. Питање некаквог савршенства и тежње савршеном, међутим, није од значаја за стране ученике енглеског који посећују Велику Британију или Сједињене Америчке Државе. Оно што је заиста важно јесте бити оспособљен за разумевање онога што се чује, било то исправно или не, стандардно или нестандардно.

Кључне речи: изговор, стандардни изговор, језички варијетети, прихваћени изговор, генерални изговор америчког енглеског.