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General American: Codified Word Phonemic Structure Variation Specifics

Variation is one of the salient features of the codified pronunciation norm of English. In General American pronunciation a word phonemic structure, among other word structures, is most subject to variation. The investigation of word phonemic structure variation in codified General American pronunciation has allowed it to establish the inventory of phonemes and the kinds of their variation that reflect the specifics of the process in this national variant of English.

Keywords: variation, word phonemic structure, General American pronunciation, codified norm

Allgemein amerikanische Aussprachenorm: die Spezifik der Variierung der kodifizierten phonemischen Struktur des Wortes

Variabilität ist eines der charakteristischen Merkmale der Aussprachenorm des Englischen. Innerhalb der allgemein amerikanischen Aussprachenorm neigt phonemische Struktur des Wortes mehr als die anderen Strukturen zur Variierung. Das Ergebnis der Untersuchung der Variierung der phonemischen Struktur des Wortes in der kodifizierten allgemein amerikanischen Aussprachenorm war die Bestimmung der Phoneme und der Abarten ihrer Variierung, die die Spezifik des Prozesses der Variierung der phonemischen Struktur des Wortes in dieser Nationalvariante des Englischen beschreiben.

Schlüsselwörter: Variierung, phonemische Struktur des Wortes, allgemein amerikanische Aussprachenorm, kodifizierte Norm

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Modern linguistics states it as a fact that variability of the language units is a universal quality and the mode of existence of the language system and the language norm. The norms are dynamic in character which means that at any given stage of their existence they possess a number of variants to express the same language entity and sense, and with the time passing these variants change and substitute one another, new variants appear, some variants fall out of use, some variants change the priority with different groups of speakers. So viewed from a dynamic perspective a norm is always the result of socio-historical selection of the language elements from the available ones, the newly coined ones, or those that are again made current in active use by speakers (Skvortsov 1998: 163–164).

At the level of the sound system of a language pronunciation norm is defined by Shakh-bagova[1] as that pronunciation form of a literary language which conforms to its rules and regularities and is implicitly accepted as correct and desirable in a certain language community. The norm also sets the range of pronunciation variants, the variability boundaries, and acceptable and unacceptable pronunciation variants. It should be mentioned that the terms literary norm / orthoepic norm and standard pronunciation in this paper are considered synonyms, the former being the terms more characteristic of traditional Ukrainian phonetic theory, the latter being the term used by most of the English sources on linguistics.

Pronunciation norm is not homogeneous, and can be divided into phonetic and orthoepic, and specific pronunciation peculiarities can be explained by either real changes that words undergo in the process of speech activity or by the rules which are applied when the word is put down in a dictionary as an orthoepic/standard reference source on pronunciation. Thus, one can speak of the codified and objective/real/living pronunciation norm, the former being formal in character, the latter being the one that exists in reality. Pronunciation norm codification presupposes the availability of finely elaborated articulatory characteristics of the sounds a language and is a final stage of describing a developed literary language (Raievskiy 1986: 91).

Codification is the most explicit and objective form of the society's approval of the norm. It is retrospective in character; it fixes those pronunciation forms which have already been in use by the speakers (Semeniuk 1998: 338). Thus, a codified norm is the type of norm that has undergone conscious description and fixing of language units and is presented as a set of rules in the relevant reference sources and dictionaries. It is a feature of long-established literary languages (Raievskiy 1986: 91). Codified pronunciation norm in its turn can be defined as a specially fixed in reference sources and dictionaries and taken as obligatory and traditional way of shaping the oral form of the spoken literary language, which is agreed upon by a language community and which has been historically well established. It should be added that codified pronunciation norm is not absolutely homogeneous and can be represented by a number of regional types (Raievskiy 1986: 91–95).

The changes which occur to the literary norm can be conditioned by the external (social) factors and internal tendencies of the development of the phonetic system of a language (e.g. the analogy principle, speech economy principle, etc.). The objective fluctuations in the literary norm are the result of its development, in the view of which the pronunciation variants are seen as the stages in the transition from the old norm to the new one (Skvortsov 1998: 164–165).

The study of language variants gives the possibility to establish the tendencies of a language's development (Gorbachevich 1979: 38) and is a marker of a dynamic character of a language. The dynamic processes in a codified pronunciation norm can reflect

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[1] Vgl. Shakhbagova (1986).

how different kinds of variation are assessed from the point of view of the norm at a certain period of time, how words develop new pronunciation variants, how borrowed new items of vocabulary change in the process of phonetic assimilation by the target language[2].

It should be noted that the codified norm does not develop smoothly. The changes of the codified norm are tied to certain time periods when a pronunciation dictionary is compiled. Up to the time when a new edition of a dictionary appears the norm is static and there is always a more or less slight discrepancy between the real norm and the codified one, the latter somewhat lagging behind. On the other hand, codified sources give linguists the possibility to accurately describe certain synchronous states of a language and then present a broader picture of a diachronic development of a language which can be done by comparing different synchronous stages of a language's development. Thus, the fixing of all possible existing pronunciation variants of a word in a pronunciation dictionary can be a way to bridge the discrepancy between a real and codified norm and the study of the pronunciation variants is important from the viewpoint of the pronunciation norm's development.

General American (GA) pronunciation norm possesses peculiar segmental and suprasegmental features (Datska 2000a) which distinguish it from the Received Pronunciation (RP)/BBC English, the British English pronunciation norm. For this study it's important to mention that the inventory of GA phonemes, presented in the pronunciation dictionary, includes 17 vowels and 24 consonants compared to 20 vowels and 24 consonants in RP. Besides, different types of phonetic symbols are used by different authors to designate the phoneme inventory of General American. Two traditions can be singled out as to the usage of phoneme inventory keys: the one used in British linguistic sources and another one which is characteristic of the American linguistic sources (Datska 2000b). In this paper we use the pronunciation key following the British tradition of designating the phonemes of General American, as it was done in the main source for the experimental material for this study – "English Pronouncing Dictionary" (EPD-1997).

Free variation can concern both segmental and suprasegmental characteristics of a word, which blend together in a phonetic structure of a word. A word phonetic structure is thought to encompass four components/structures: 1) phonemic structure, 2) the structure that describes the specifics of co-articulatory phenomena within a word, 3) syllabic structure, 4) accentual structure (Torsuiev 1962: 5). All of the above-mentioned structures are in a complex interrelation: beginning with a phonemic structure all of the further structures base themselves on the previous ones and are a more complex form of organizing a word's entity involving all its structures (Torsuiev 1962: 15).

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[2] Vgl. Mikhailova (1983).

The thorough investigation of the „English Pronouncing Dictionary" (EPD-1997) revealed that all components of the phonetic structure of the word manifest variation to a certain degree. The most cases of variation though have been registered with the phonemic structure of a word, which account for about 15 % of variation cases fixed in the pronunciation dictionary (Datska 2001a: 158), e.g. *water* /ˈwɑːtɚ, ˈwɔː-/; *encourage* /enˈkɜːrɪdʒ, ɪn-/, *parent* /ˈperənt, ˈpær-/, *project* (n.) /ˈprɑːdʒekt, -dʒɪkt/.

The dynamics of the word phonemic structure in General American includes the possibility for one word to be pronounced in a number of variants all of which are considered correct. Among the possible kinds of variation free phonemic variation stands out to be most salient in codified General American pronunciation. Free phonemic variation is defined as a formal kind of variation between the phonemes in a word phonemic structure. It does not depend on the phoneme distribution, does not influence the change of the meaning of a word or the change of its lexico-grammatical class. This kind of phonemic variation is free from the influence of such social or stylistic factors as gender, age, speech style, speech situation, etc. Thus phonemes vary irrespective of the socio-phonetic context and bear no markers in the dictionary (Datska 2000c). Certain language conditioning takes place sometimes though in the form of assimilations, stressed or unstressed position of a vowel that varies, the influence of certain historical phonetic processes.

The inventory of free phonemic variation includes separate segments – the phonemes – that are the basis for a phonemic structure variation and the kinds of phonemic variation which involve the pairs of variable phonemes in a certain word phonemic structure. Compiling an inventory of free phonemic variation presupposes measuring the frequency of occurrence of variable phonemes. Free phonemic variation means can be organized in a system: on the level of vowels and consonants as groups of sounds this will involve establishing the core variation phonemes – the ones that make up the most cases of variation; on the level of each vowel and consonant it will require establishing the specific articulation features of the phonemes that vary and highlighting those features that underlie the variation process.

As a result of the thorough study of the EPD-1997 there have been singled out 6487 words which have more than one variant of the phonemic structure. These yielded 7191 cases of pairs of phonemes that vary within the word phonemic structures. The majority of words (88%) have 2 variants of the possible pronunciation of a word codified in the dictionary, e.g. *minority* /maɪˈnɔrəti, mɪ-/; *marriage* /ˈmerɪdʒ, ˈmær-/. The rest 12% of words can have from 3 to theoretically 16 variants of possible normative pronunciations of a word, e.g. *immature* /ɪməˈtʊr, -ˈtjʊr, -ˈtʃʊr/; *prospective* /prəˈspektɪv, proʊ-, prɑ:-/; *nostalgia* /nɑːˈstældʒə, nə-, nɔː-, -dʒiə/.

Variation of vowels is the main source for the phonemic structure variation. Vowels alone stand for 80% of cases for creating alternative pronunciation variants of a word. Consonants are the cause for 15% of all variable pronunciations, e.g. /n-ŋ/, /k-tʃ/:

conch /kɑ:ŋk, kɑ:ntʃ/; /s-z/: *glucose* /ˈgluːkoʊs, ˈgluːkoʊz/. About 5% of variants are caused by the variation of both vowels and consonants in the same word phonemic structure, e.g. /n-ŋ/, /dʒ-g/, /ɪ-ə/: *fungicidal* /ˌfʌndʒɪˈsaɪdl, ˌfʌŋgəˈsaɪdl/; *paradise* /ˈperədaɪs, ˈpær-, -daɪz/ (Datska 2000c: 91).

The specific character of the free phonemic variation in General American manifests itself through the variation of 17 vowels and 24 consonants that constitute all phonemes of the phoneme inventory of GA as presented in EPD (Datska 2001b). Vowel variation is the basis for phoneme structure variation 5,5 times more often than consonants (80,13% and 14,54% respectively). This kind of correlation can be viewed as a result of different functional value of vowels and consonants within a word: consonants bear more information and meaning in the information structure of a word, they are the elements that are more important for constituting and differentiating meanings of words while vowels form the background against which semantically loaded consonantal differences are manifested, thus vowels are the segments which are more subject to variation.

The inventory of free phonemic variation can be described along certain parameters. One of these is the frequency of occurrence of certain vowels and consonants in the phonemic structures that have various realizations. The most frequent vowels that vary in GA are: /ɑ:/, /e/, /ə/, /ɪ/, /oʊ/, /ɔ:/. The phonemes /e/, /ə/ and /ɪ/ vary rather often as they are generally frequent vowels in the English language. Besides, vowels /ɪ/ and /ə/ are the ones used in unstressed positions in weak forms of the words, which are a characteristic feature of English. Vowels /ɑ:/, /oʊ/, /ɔ:/ are characteristic specifically of phoneme variation in GA. The vowel /ɑ:/ in GA is known to substitute RP /ɒ/, which can be one of the factors to explain high frequency of /ɑ:/ occurrence in GA phoneme variation. The high frequency of the diphthong /oʊ/ is the result of the unstable gliding articulations of the English diphthongs which are historically unstable elements in the vocalic system of English. As a result of functional organization of the free phonemic vowel variation inventory it has been established that the main tendency for vowel variation includes low vowels changing for central vowels, thus exemplifying the tendency of vowels to centralization, that is the shift of the articulation area to the center of the mouth cavity.

Among the consonants that take part in the variation process the most frequent are the following 5 phonemes: /ø/, /s/, /z/, /j/, /t/, /tʃ/. The inventory of the consonants includes the so-called zero-phoneme /ø/, which marks the absence of a phoneme in one of the variants where the other one possesses a consonant. The high frequency of zero-phoneme occurrence is the result of the /ø-j/-kind of variation, which is the reflection of the specific character of General American pronunciation, known to omit /j/-sound between /t/, /d/, /n/ or, sometimes, /l/, /s/, /z/ and /u:/, which is spelled as *u, ew, eu*, e.g.: *tune* /<u>tu:</u>n – <u>tju:</u>n/, *new* /<u>nu:</u> – <u>nju:</u>/. Apical alveolar phonemes /s/, /z/, /t/ are generally frequent in English and occur in many words. The pronunciation variants

involving apical alveolar /s/, /z/, /t/ and palatal alveolar /ʃ/, /ʒ/ are as well the reflection of the historical phonological processes, which are still preserved in modern English pronunciation, namely africation and assibilation of the alveolar /t/, /d/ and /s/, /z/ before the sonorant /j/.

The corpus of words that have various normative pronunciations can be described in terms of a number of other parameters that can characterize a word as a linguistic unit: the words with variable phonemic structures are mostly two-, three-, four-syllabic; many of them are borrowings, alternative variants of phonemic structures being the reflection of the original pronunciation of a word and its assimilated pronunciation form. Another important factor that contributes to higher word phonemic variation chances is the unstressed position of a vowel.

Thus the undertaken investigation has proved that phonemic structure variation is a salient feature of codified General American pronunciation standard, as reflected in EPD-1997, free phonemic variation being its primary source and basis. The study of the variable character of GA pronunciation norm makes it possible to state that the elasticity of the GA codified norm is getting more vivid compared to the older editions of pronunciation dictionaries. The results obtained in the paper can serve the ground for diachronic study of the phonemic structure dynamics of General American.

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