

Variety is the Spice of the Pronunciation of English: Alternative Pronunciations of the Word Phonemic Structures in Received Pronunciation as a Linguistic and Didactic Issue

The paper presents the results of analysis of free phonemic variation in word phonemic structures in RP as its striking feature. Alternative pronunciation variants of words are created by vowels, consonants, and a combination of both when in free variation in a segmental composition of words. Free phonemic variation is conditioned by the position / phonetic environment of the alternating phoneme(s) in a word. The positional specification of free phonemic variation and the operation of a number of other factors substantiate the inner systemic character of free phoneme variation in the composition of English words in PR. EFL learners should be aware of existing alternative variants of words and their liability for change in the course of time.

Keywords: word phonemic structure, free phonemic variation, alternative pronunciations, Received Pronunciation, teaching pronunciation model

Vielfalt ist das Gewürz der Aussprache des Englischen: Alternative Aussprachen phonemischer Strukturen in der RP-Aussprache als eine sprachliche und didaktische Frage

In dem Beitrag werden die Ergebnisse einer Analyse der freien phonemischen Variation in phonemischen Wortstrukturen in RP als auffälliges Merkmal präsentiert. Alternative Aussprachevarianten von Wörtern werden durch Vokale, Konsonanten und eine Kombination von beiden erzeugt, wenn sie in einer segmentalen Zusammensetzung von Wörtern frei variieren. Freie phonemische Variation wird durch die Position / phonetische Umgebung des alternierenden Phonems / der alternierenden Phoneme in einem Wort bestimmt. Die Positionsangabe der freien phonemischen Variation und die Wirkung einer Reihe anderer Faktoren untermauern den inneren systemischen Charakter der freien Phonemvariation bei der Zusammensetzung der englischen Wörter in der PR. EFL-Lernende sollten sich der vorhandenen alternativen Wortvarianten und ihrer Anfälligkeit für Änderungen im Laufe der Zeit bewusst sein.

Schlüsselwörter: phonemische Struktur des Wortes, freie phonemische Variation, alternative Aussprachen, empfangene Aussprache, Modell der Lehraussprache

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Received: 14.10.2019

Accepted: 9.11.2019

“What is certain is that the pronunciation of English is an area of learning that is full of pitfalls for the unwary”

Windsor Lewis (1999: 226)

1. Introduction

Variation of language units is a form of movement in the language system in synchrony that precedes language change, thus ensuring a smooth, gradual transition from an old quality to a new one (Rastorguyeva 1978: 63). The study of variation of language elements of various levels as the source of their historic changes, the form and condition of their realization helps determine ways of language system evolution. Present-day English is an amazing amalgam of geographical, regional, social et cetera varieties with their corresponding accents. This paper explores alternative pronunciations of words in Received Pronunciation (hence is RP), one of the best described pronunciation standards of English, a huge success story as a pronunciation teaching model for EFL learners throughout the 20th century that nowadays has lost much of its prestige and power for reasons which are not the subject of our discussion, but still remaining a popular didactic/reference model in TEFL practices of many countries of Europe, including Ukraine. Since the word phonetic structure can be described in terms of different functional units – phonemes or their speech manifestations – allophones, it is possible to speak about word phonemic or allophonic composition, and consequently about the phonemic or allophonic variability of the word structures. The substitution of one phoneme for another in the same position in a word that results in the loss of phonological contrast between them and in the production of noticeably different pronunciations of the same word without causing a change in meaning is termed free phonemic variation (hence is FPhV), for instance, the vowels /e/ and /eɪ/ are in contrast in the words *pen* and *pain*, but are in free variation in the alternative pronunciations of the word *again*: /ə'gen/, /eɪ'gen/ (see a detailed explanation of free variation in: Lyons 1968: 73). If allophones substitute for one another, this alternation is free allophonic variation (Cruttenden 2001: 45).

Free phonemic variation in English pronunciation has long been in the focus of a number of studies (Barber 1964, 1976; Brook 1977; Cruttenden 2001; Gimson 1969; Hannisdal 2006; Roach, Arnfield 1998; Wells 1982), many of which tend to interpret it as sporadic fluctuations in the forms of words the description of which tends to be restricted to enlisting cases where FPhV occurs. The interconnection between phonemic variation and other features of the word as a complex systemic unit, for instance, its accentual, morphemic, informational structures, and the source of origin are under-researched. Meanwhile the systemic approach to the object of study requires its analysis from various perspectives to fully depict it. This paper explores the free pho-

nemic variation in word phonetic structures in Received Pronunciation (hence is RP) as a phenomenon that reveals a systemic character conditioned by intra-lingual and extra-lingual factors. Using observation data from the two well-known pronunciation dictionaries – „The Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary” originally compiled by Daniel Jones (hence is CEPD), and „The Longman Pronunciation Dictionary” by J. C. Wells (hence is LPD), our study depicts a set of factors that condition FPhV in RP. This study has relevance to the body of literature on systemic survey of word pronunciation variants, and to research on variation as manifestation of dynamic nature of pronunciation norm. It concludes with practical phonodidactic implications for EFL teacher training programmes where RP is used as a pronunciation teaching model (reference model).

2. Free Phonemic Variation in Word Phonemic Structures as a Salient Feature of RP

Permissible free variation of the phonemic and accentual patterns of words appears to be a striking feature of RP (Gimson 1969: 75, Barber 1964, Zsiga 2012). According to our estimate, every fourth word of general vocabulary in the corpus of CEPD (2011) has alternative pronunciation variants. The range of variation of the word phonemic structures in RP is rather wide: approx. 74.08% of words with FPhV fixed in CEPD have two pronunciation variants, e.g. *data* /'deɪ.tə – 'dɑ:tə /; the rest of the words with FPhV can have from three to 26 variant pronunciation forms, e.g. for the word *elasticity*, CEPD offers the following information on its variants: /,ɪ.læs'tɪs.ə.ti, ,el-, ,ɪ:.læs-, –lə'stɪs-, –lɑ:'-, –ɪ.tɪ ; ɪ,læs'tɪs-, – ,lɑ:'stɪs-/ that can be presented in full as given below (see more on how the dictionary information on alternative pronunciations should be understood in: Roach/Arnfield 1998: 164):

1.	,ɪ.læs'tɪs.ə.tɪ	10.	ɪ.læs'tɪs.ɪ.tɪ	19.	ɪ,læs'tɪs.ə.tɪ
2.	,el.æs'tɪs.ə.tɪ	11.	,el.æs'tɪs.ɪ.tɪ	20.	ɪ:læs'tɪs.ə.tɪ
3.	,ɪ:.læs'tɪs.ə.tɪ	12.	,ɪ:.læs'tɪs.ɪ.tɪ	21.	ɪ,lɑ:'stɪs.ə.tɪ
4.	,ɪ.ləs'tɪs.ə.tɪ	13.	,ɪ.ləs'tɪs.ɪ.tɪ	22.	ɪ:lɑ:'stɪs.ə.tɪ
5.	,el.əs'tɪs.ə.tɪ	14.	,el.əs'tɪs.ɪ.tɪ	23.	ɪ,læs'tɪs.ɪ.tɪ
6.	,ɪ:ləs'tɪs.ə.tɪ	15.	,ɪ:ləs'tɪs.ɪ.tɪ	24.	ɪ:læs'tɪs.ɪ.tɪ
7.	,ɪ.lɑ:'stɪs.ə.tɪ	16.	,ɪ.lɑ:'stɪs.ɪ.tɪ	25.	ɪ,lɑ:'stɪs.ɪ.tɪ
8.	,e.lɑ:'stɪs.ə.tɪ	17.	,e.lɑ:'stɪs.ɪ.tɪ	26.	ɪ:lɑ:'stɪs.ɪ.tɪ
9.	,ɪ:.lɑ:'stɪs.ə.tɪ	18.	,ɪ:.lɑ:'stɪs.ɪ.tɪ		

Quantitative analysis of the inventory of free phonemic variation in alternative pronunciation variants of words in RP has shown that 81% of them are formed by the alternation of vowel phonemes, e.g.: *privacy* /'prɪv.ə.sɪ, 'praɪ.və-/; variation of conso-

nant phonemes alone gives 5% of variants, e.g.: *withdraw* /wɪð' drɔ:, wɪθ/, while the remaining 14% of variants is yielded by variation of both vowels and consonants in the same word, e.g.: *encounter* /ɪn' kaʊn.təʳ, ɪŋ-, en-, eŋ-/. The more active role of vowels in FPhV as compared with consonants is determined by the systemic and functional characteristics of this type of phonemes: from the point of view of information theory, vowel phonemes in many languages are redundant to a great extent in the segmental organization of a word, for its correct reception in communication the transfer of consonants is more crucial (Jakobson/Waugh 1979: 85). That could furnish some explanation to the fact that in a word phonemic organization, vowel phonemes are less rigid elements than consonants, they are more subject to changes in language diachrony (Potter 1969: 15, Strang 1979: 10). Our observation shows that all 20 RP vowel phonemes (see their list in: Cruttenden 2001: 148) can alternate with other vowels when in free variation in words, in comparison with 23 RP consonants out of 24 in the inventory (see their list in: Cruttenden 2001: 216); the phoneme /b/ does not alternate with any other RP phoneme, while FPhV of /f/, /v/, /p/, /m/, /ŋ/, /z/ occurs in a small number of words. Each RP vowel phoneme can have from 2 to 15 alternating phonemes, e.g. the neutral vowel alternates with ɪ, e, æ, ʊ, ɒ, ʌ, u:, ɔ:, ɑ:, ɜ:, eɪ, ɪə, eə, əv, əʊ (=15), while a consonant can have from 2 to 3 free variants. This amazing “elasticity” of RP is considered to be its specific feature that could be explained by a set of both intra – and extra – lingual factors of the development of the English phonological system (Roach/Arnfield 1998: 166).

3. Factors Conditioning Free Phonemic Variation in RP Word Pronunciation Forms

Systemic analysis of free variation of phonemes and lexical stress in English words enables to single out the following set of factors that affect this process : (1) the position of the varying phoneme according to the location of lexical stress; (2) phonological and phonetic factors operating as the result of realization of the phonological system structural potentials in its historical development; (3) the source of the word origin (native vs. borrowed); (4) extra-lingual factors that comprise two groups: factors facilitating variation in the word phonetic structures, such as language contacts, dialect impact, speakers' age differentiation etc.; and factors that exert twofold impact on the pronunciation variants, for example, speakers' educational level, mass media impact; on the one hand, a higher educational level of accent users, and accent functioning in the media facilitates its consolidation and restriction of variation; on the other hand, accent users' foreign languages proficiency creates conditions for the development of variant realizations for lexical borrowings.

Our survey of free phonemic variation types in alternative pronunciations of words gives grounds to claim that for vowel variation, the position of the varying phoneme in relation to lexical stress location, in other words, a prosodic factor, is of paramount importance;

there is the so-called neutral sound /ə/ in the phonemic inventory of English whose occurrences in words are restricted exclusively to unstressed positions (Cruttenden 2001: 127). For the variation of consonants, the phonetic features of the varying phoneme position are most important that are dictated by the phonotactic regularities of the word segmental organization, including assimilatory pressures of the environment that are less essential for the variation of vowels. We will outline a set of conditions that facilitate vowel variations under the influence of accentual features of the position where variation occurs. More than 80% of vowel variations that occur in unstressed positions support the claim that free phonemic variation is more likely to take place in the position that is **not** marked by lexical stress. On the other hand, analysis of accentual properties of positions with varying phonemes should be complemented by the principles of diachronic reconstruction, since marking the position with secondary stress at earlier stages of word phonological development – in the late Middle English or the early New English periods, – causes the occurrence of the vowel of full formation that alternates with the neutral vowel. A general tendency of the English word accentual structures development during the above mentioned periods was the weakening of secondary stress functions and its loss in certain positions in words (Dobson 1968: 832). Hence, in language synchrony the vowel quality can be dependent on a complex interplay of historical and live accentual tendencies (Gimson 1969: 148). Nowadays, some English words preserve the vowel of full formation in the unstressed position which has a lexical stress in the base word. In such a position in derivatives, this phoneme can alternate with the neutral vowel /ə/, e.g.: *adaptation* /,æd.æp'teɪ.ʃən, -əp-/ (cf.: *adapt* /ə'dæpt/); *horrific* /hɒr'ɪf.ɪk, hɒr'ɪf-/ (cf.: *horror* /'hɒr.ə/).

In the process of assimilation of phonemic structures of lexical borrowings in the Middle English period, the syllables that were absent in the native word-stock – post-tonic final *-a*, *-e*, *-o*, *-as*, *-od*, *-ol*, *-or*, *-os*, were marked by secondary stress (Dobson 1968: 835). At the subsequent stages of their development, the function of secondary stress in many of the above said formants was lost, but at the present stage, the phonemic structures of such words display the variation of the neutral vowel and a vowel of full formation, e.g.: *cinema* /sɪn.ə.mə, -mə:/; *mongol* /'mɒŋ.gəl, -gɒl/; *capias* /keɪ.pi.əs, -pjəs, -pjəs/. As exemplified above, the loss of stress conditioned the alternation of vowel phonemes. In our corpus of observation material, there are cases of free variation of certain vowel phonemes length, e.g. /ɒ/ /ɔ:/ /u:/, where the motivating factor appears to be the impact of the post-consonantal environment. In synchrony, variations /ɒ/-/ɔ:/, /ɔ:/-/ɒ/, /u:/-/ʊ/ are remnants of operation of the Middle English (hence is ME) and early New English (hence is early NE) phonological tendencies regulating vowel length (shortening, lengthening) that are not actual in present-day English, but they condition the above mentioned cases of FPhV. The lengthening of /ɒ/ into /ɔ:/ before voiceless fricatives /s/, /f/, /θ/ in XVI–XVII centuries (Dobson 1968: 517) finds different explanations given by researchers: the essence of that process was to preserve a vowel with a narrower mouth opening before fricatives, since in that period the

quality of the ME /o/ was undergoing changes by way of increasing its opening and lessening its labialization (Barber 1976: 43, Dobson 1968: 539); certain lengthening of vowel segments before fricatives (in comparison with plosives and affricates) can be also explained by the need of a more accurate articulatory configuration in pronunciation of such consonants (Barber 1976: 45). In this case, in our opinion, the increase in the degree of opening of a short phoneme simultaneously caused its lengthening, as it is common knowledge that the vowel length increases alongside with its openness increase. This process was probably consolidated by the effect of the preceding vowel lengthening before a fricative that is typical of such consonants. But not every change is a development (progress): the resultant combination of segments “a long vowel + a fricative consonant” required more articulatory efforts that inevitably underwent elimination, possibly due to the operation of the economy principle in pronunciation. During the 20th c., CEPD displayed alternation of /ɒ/ – /ɔ:/ in the words with roots, such as *broth-*, *cross-*, *frost-*, *off-*, *oft-*, but the latest edition of this dictionary does not feature the alternative variant with /ɔ:/ any more.

In the phonemic structures of certain words from our observation corpus, the long phoneme /u:/ alternates with the short /ʊ/ or vice versa in monosyllabic words and their derivatives, e.g.: *room* /ru:m, rʊm/ (CEPD, LPD); *mushroom* /'mʌʃ.rʊm, -ru:m/ (CEPD; LPD); *broom* /bru:m, brʊm/ (CEPD, LPD); the long phoneme /ɔ:/ alternates with the short /ɒ/ in the distribution before *-lt*, *-ls*, e.g.: *also* /'ɔ:l.səʊ, 'ɒl-/ (LPD), *alter* /'ɔ:l.tə, 'ɒl-/ (LPD, CEPD), *alternative* /ɔ:l'te:.nə.tɪv, ɒl-/ (LPD, CEPD). Those alternations are resultant of the tendency regulating vowel length: FPhV /u:/ – /ʊ/ appeared as the result of shortening of the long phoneme in the 17th c. in monosyllabic structures before /m/. The phoneme /ɔ:/ formed from ME /o/ before the sonant /l/ frequently underwent shortening before *-lt*, *-ls*; at first the alternation /ɒ/ – /ɔ:/ occurred in dialect pronunciation, and later became standard (Dobson 1968: 498). The variation of the vowel length in the above said cases could be accounted for by a strong shortening impact of the following sonorant or a combination of “sonorant+ consonant” segments on the preceding vowel.

Within the consonantal subsystem of RP, the alternations of /t+j/-/tʃ/, /d+j/-/dʒ/, /s+j/-/ʃ/, /z+j/-/ʒ/ that feature affricatization and assibilation of forelingual consonants can serve as bright examples of free phonemic variations that are positionally determined. Monophonemization of groups /t+j/, /d+j/, /s+j/, /z+j/ the phonetic nature of which is coalescence assimilation (Cruttenden 2001: 286) has different temporal characteristics in various lexical layers of English. In the focus of our observation, there is affricatization and assibilation that occurred in the New English period: actually those types of assimilation feature the process of syntagmatic coalescence of forelingual plosives and fricatives with /j/ in post-tonic positions of a large group of words, especially lexical borrowings from French. The process of complete monophonemization of the above given combinations of sound segments lasted for a few centuries, due to counter-action

mainly extra-lingual factors: the use of affricates and sibilants was associated with colloquial style of pronunciation, and normalization traditionally resisted the infiltration of colloquial forms into pronunciation standard. But at present, variants /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/ have acquired the status of more widely used variants, ousting the bi-phonemic combinations into less spread ones, e.g.: *gradual* /'grædʒ.u.əl, 'græd.ju.əl/ (CEPD, LPD); *statue* /'stætʃ.u:, 'stæt.ju:/ (CEPD, LPD); *issue* /'ɪʃ.u:, 'ɪs.ju:/ (CEPD, LPD); *casualty* /'kæʒuəlti, 'kæzj-/ (CEPD, LPD). It should be mentioned that for American English pronunciation, both CEPD and LPD frequently feature variants only with affricates and sibilants for the above mentioned examples. Present-day studies of RP highlight the users' preferences of /tʃ/, /dʒ/ over bi-phonemic combinations /t+j/, /d+j/ also in stressed syllables, e.g.: *Tuesday* /'tju:z.deɪ, 'tʃu:z-/; *tune* /tju:n, tʃu:n/; *due* /dju:, dʒu:/; *duke, Duke* /dju:k, dʒu:k/ (CEPD), and such innovations are treated as well-established, though until recently they were considered colloquial and were not displayed in pronunciation dictionaries.

Another vivid example of positionally determined FPhV is yod dropping, that is the alternation of /j/ with the so-called zero phoneme /ø/ in the word middle and final unstressed positions. This type of variation has historic roots that refer to the 18th c. when the development of the NE diphthong /iu/, and also the phoneme /y:/ in the phonemic structures of French borrowings went along deviant paths (Barber 1976: 43). The sonant /j/ undergoes elision in the position after homorganic consonants that have the same place of articulation, e.g.: *enthusiasm* /ɪn'θju:zi.æz.əm, -'θu:z-/ (CEPD, LPD), *illuminate* /ɪ'lu:mi.nert, -'lju:z-/ (CEPD, LPD). The process of /j/ elimination in the above indicated position was firstly fixed in the 18th c. (Jespersen 1933: 381). In present-day RP, the number of initial and medial positions of the sonant /j/ usage is diminishing, especially after /s/ and /l/. CEPD and LPD survey of the words with *suit-*, *super-*, *supra-* formants shows that the variant without /j/ is more preferred by RP users, while /j/ is marked as less spread, e.g.: *suitable* /'su:tə.bl, 'sju:z-/ (CEPD, LPD); *supermarket* /'su:pə.mɑ:kɪt, 'sju:z-/ (CEPD, LPD). In General American pronunciation, the process of yod dropping has spread in all post-consonantal positions (Wells 1982: 206): this observation is supported by CEPD and LPD data.

Cases of FPhV /n/-/ŋ/ or /ŋ/-/n/ also occur before consonants /k/ and /g/ that are homorganic with /ŋ/. Otto Jespersen claims that the prosodic factor – a stressed syllable, and also belonging to French borrowings facilitate the realization of /ŋ/ in a more widely used pronunciation variant (Jespersen 1933: 533). This regularity is supported by the LPD and CEPD data survey, e.g.: *income* /'ɪŋ.kʌm, 'ɪn-/; *inquest* /'ɪŋ.kwest, 'ɪn-/ . The variant with /n/ enjoys the status of a more widely used pronunciation variant at the end of an unstressed syllable before the primary stress, e.g.: *inclose* /ɪn'kleʊz, ɪŋ-/; *incongruent* /ɪn'kɒŋ.gru.ənt, ɪŋ-/; *ingrain* /ɪn'grem, ɪŋ-/; *congratulate* /kən'grætʃ.ʊ.leɪt, kəŋ-/ . General American pronunciation selects /n/ as a single pronunciation variant in many cases, where RP displays FPhV /n/-/ŋ/, e.g.: (RP) *include* /ɪn'klu:d, ɪŋ-/ , vs. (GA) /ɪn'klu:d/.

Phonological normalization of lexical borrowings in RP traditionally occurs in two directions: firstly, the anglicization, that is the adaptation of the pronunciation of alien words to the rules of the English phonology, and secondly, the preservation of features of the original pronunciation, at least as an alternative variant. Currently, the latter approach is gaining popularity, for instance, pronunciation variants that are closer to the original forms have been reflected in pronunciation dictionaries, as is the case with borrowings from classical languages and French, e.g.: *deity*, *Deity* /'dei.ɪ.ti, 'di:-/; *libra* pound: /'li:.brə, 'laɪ-/; *virago* /vɪ'ra:.gəʊ/, *tête-à-tête* /'teɪ.tə:'teɪ, 'tɛt.ə'tɛt/ (CEPD). An interesting example is the pronunciation of the prefix *retro* – /ret.rəʊ/ that until the 14th edition of CEPD had two pronunciation forms – /ret.rəʊ/ and /rɪ:t.rəʊ/, the second of which appears to be more anglicized, but in the latest edition of the dictionary only /ret.rəʊ/ is displayed that is closer to its Latin original. This can be explained by the impact of such an extra-lingual factor as the increase of educational level of RP users, their better awareness of foreign pronunciations. In any case, language contacts condition variation in the phonemic structures of lexical borrowings.

All the above depicted examples give grounds to claim that free phonemic variation in word pronunciation forms in RP can be explained in terms of phonological categories relevant to the phoneme inventory of English, it is conditioned by definite factors relating to historic or actual phonological processes, the operation of which could appear obscure in language synchrony, unless diachronic reconstruction is applied.

4. Linguistic and Pedagogical Implications for Free Phonemic Variation in RP

At a first glance, in language synchrony, numerous free phonemic variations of word structures in RP seem redundant, creating a mass of isofunctional forms: they are equal from the normative perspective, making a variant chain in which the first variant is considered as more widely used, while the other variants are alternative or less widely spread (CEPD: vi). But from a historical perspective, all variants are members of a moving chronological sequence: in the course of time, more widely spread variants can acquire the status of less spread ones, their place can be occupied by other variants, the appearance of entirely new variants and the elimination of the old ones from normative usage are possible. The results of diachronic analysis conducted in this research define the functional specification of FPhV as follows: free pronunciation variants perform the role of chronological trims – new, old, obsolete at a particular stage of the word phonemic structure evolution. Thus, such variants should not be treated as language imperfection, but as indicators of dynamic processes occurring in pronunciation norm.

Contemporary sociophonetics and phonodidactics treat no one way of speaking to be superior to any other; nevertheless, “it is an actual fact of language use that the way of speaking received by the speakers who are most educated and/or who hold social and

political power is often viewed as the most prestigious variety which has the greatest social advantage” (Pennington 1996: 17). See a detailed discussion of a current situation of the choice of pronunciation models of English and all available options in (Szypra-Kozłowska 2015: 8–33). Though RP has lost its traditional status of a prestigious pronunciation model, this ‘reference accent’ “retains considerable status” (Crystal 1995: 365), and in particular it still remains the teaching model taught to foreign learners in many countries. Thus the knowledge and understanding of free phonemic variation in RP words is essential to learners who use RP as reference.

The English pronunciation norm appears for EFL learners in the explicit way through reflection/fixing of actual pronunciation forms in dictionaries and other reference sources, that is through its codification. EFL learners who master English out of its natural environment rely on the codified pronunciation norm, but they should be wary of the fact that though pronouncing dictionaries reflect the living pronunciation more or less precisely, there is no one-to-one correlation between living and codified pronunciation: the latter is never fully adequate to the former. At the perception level, EFL learners should be exposed to all existing pronunciation variants of a word; but at the production level, it would be reasonable to memorize and interiorize the first, most widely used variant displayed in the pronunciation dictionary. For technical reasons dictionaries do not reflect the newest tendencies occurring in the actual pronunciation, thus dictionary pronunciations must be compared with variants used in living speech of educated users of the target language.

5. Conclusions

This study of pronunciation variants of the word phonemic structures has shown that free phonemic variation is a salient feature of RP. The bulk of alternating pronunciation variants are created by free variation of vowels (81%), while consonants are not so active in this process (5% of alternating variants). All 20 RP vowel phonemes can be in free variation in word phonemic structures with the neutral vowel /ə/ being a “champion” – it alternates with 15 other vowels and a zero vowel. Out of 24 consonant phonemes in RP inventory, 23 create word pronunciation variants, while alternating with 2-3 other consonants, with the phoneme /b/ not participating in free variation, and phonemes /f/, /v/, /p/, /m/, /ŋ/, /z/ having a very low functional load in it. Overwhelming participation of RP vowels in free variation can be explained by their nature as a more fleeting segments in a word phonemic structure.

Taking into account the environment of a varying phoneme helps identify the mechanism of free phonemic variation that is not a sporadic alternation of phonemes but the process that has foundations in the phonological system of the language (the operation of historic and live phonological processes), and is also defined by extra-lingual factors (the impact of alien phonological systems during the language contact, normalization

efforts, social prestige of certain pronunciation forms). Free phonemic variants are a reflection of dynamic processes that word phonemic structures undergo in their development. The following phonodidactic implications for the TEFL practice where RP is used as a teaching model are obvious: EFL learners should be aware of existing alternative pronunciations of words on the level of vocabulary perception, while on the level of speech production it is reasonable to memorize the most widely used variant displayed in an RP specialist pronouncing dictionary. In the course of time, pronunciation variants are liable for changes that can occur, according to Gimson, within 70-80 years, a period of life of one generation of accent users. Paraphrasing the words by Winsor Lewis (1999: 226) chosen as an epigraph to this paper, it can be claimed that alternative pronunciations when neglected or unattended can be “pitfalls for the unwary”.

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