

## On Peripheral Phonemes

By JOSEF VACHEK, Praha

It is often erroneously supposed that language is a closed system, i.e. that all its elements are rooted in it with equal firmness. The actual situation is, of course, different: any language level contains elements of transitory status which cannot be well classed with the standard clear-cut categories prevailing on that level. This is also true of the phonic level of language where, apart from the firmly rooted elements of the pattern, one can also find elements having peripheral status. Such elements are phonemes which are either not "fully integrated" in the phonemic pattern (to use *A. Martinet's* term) or exhibit a very low functional yield. A couple of instances of such peripheral phonemes, taken from Modern English, will show that a more detailed analysis of such cases may throw some light on a number of tendencies of development which otherwise do not stand out with particular prominence.

The first of such instances is that of the ModE phoneme /h/. While the Old English /h/, with its allophone [x], could occur in a relatively large number of positions in the word, its ModE descendant /h/ is a peripheral element of this language. It virtually occurs in one single position only, viz. at the beginning of a stem-morpheme before a following vowel (or, semi-vowel). In the course of the development of English the phoneme h/x was gradually ousted from all other positions in the word. The reason for this process was, in part, its isolation in the pattern of English consonant phonemes. This isolation was brought about by the loosening of the tie originally binding the h/x-phoneme to the phoneme g/ʒ, especially after the loss of the ME phoneme /ʒ/, which had become independent during the OE period. After the phoneme h/x had thus been confined to a relatively small number of word-positions, a quantitative handicap was added to the already existing quali-

tative one, i.e. the slight functional yield of the phoneme /h/. As is well known, in popular dialects, uncharged with cultural and civilizational tasks, so copiously imposed upon the standard language, [h] has been, as a rule, totally discarded as a phoneme. Thus, in the Cockney of London it is only found as a phonostylistic feature, acting, at the same time, as a signal of the beginning of words (cf. the notorious droppings and misplacements of h's).

In the course of the process discarding the phoneme /h/ also several other phonemes came to be dismissed from the phonematic pattern of English, the reason being again the small functional yield of such phonemes. The concerned phonemes were the EME voiceless liquids /R, L, N/ and – somewhat later – /W/, at least in some parts of the English speaking territory.

The process leading to the disappearance of /h/ was motivated, in its earliest stages, by the regularities governing the activities of the speech organs (see changes like *fōhan* > *fōn*, *hræfen* > *Raven*, *hlūd* > *Lūd*, etc.). Later changes were motivated purely linguistically, i.e. by the tendency to abolish a phoneme which had become non-lucrative on account of its very slight functional yield. It should be stressed that the whole discarding process has sprung out from purely domestic roots. Some accelerating influence of French on the process, however, cannot be flatly dismissed (though it is very difficult to prove it). It is certainly remarkable that the distribution of the sounds *h* and *χ* in 13th century French (both positive and negative) was identical with the one that was to become characteristic of English in the centuries to come.

The other ModE phoneme to recede in the course of the development of English is /r/. Compared with its Old English ancestor, the ModE /r/ has had to give up a large number of its original positions of occurrence (cf. e.g., OE *heorte*, *wiersa*, *feor*, *hær*, *steorra*, *hræfen*, *writan* with ModE [hɑ:t, wə:s, fa:, ðeə, sta:, reivn, rait]). Although a relatively large number of the positions of occurrence has been left to ModE /r/, some phonetic phenomena clearly reveal that the position of that phoneme in the Southern British standard of ModE has been appreciably shaken.

First, there is the rise of the "intrusive r" (as in *India-r office*), and, conversely, the abolishment of the "linking r" even in those places where it is phonetically legitimate (e.g. [fa: əwei]), found especially with the younger generations. Both these tendencies are probably called forth by the functional ambiguity of ModE /r/

which serves both as a means of distinctive function (as in *red*, *crab*) and as a means of purely delimitative function (as in *India-r office*). It appears that both categories of speakers tend to make the status of ModE /r/ less ambiguous: those who abolish the linking *r* emphasize the distinctive function of /r/, while those who introduce the intrusive *r* rather tend to stress its delimitative function.

The latter tendency is underlined by some other trends attacking the existence of the distinctive /r/. One of them tends to merge the initial clusters *tr-*, *dr-* with the affricates [tʃ, dʒ], so that, e.g., in childrens speech, words like *true* and *chew* sound almost as homophones. Should this trend assert itself on a wider scale (which, for the present, it does not), it might dispose of a fairly large number of the instances of distinctive /r/. – The other trend consists in a strong labialization of /r/, noted by the British phoneticians since the thirties, but reflected in literary spellings like *wough*, *dwiver*, etc. already in the 18th century. This trend, merging /r/ with /w/, is apt to dispose, at a single blow, of the distinctive function of /r/, relegating it to the status of a mere delimitative signal.

Here again, the discarding tendency is motivated both quantitatively (by the small functional yield) and qualitatively. One of the qualitative motives was the above noted functional ambiguity of /r/, serving both distinctive and delimitative functions. Besides, and this is even more important, /r/, too, is structurally isolated in the phonematic pattern of ModE consonants. This isolation became a fact when the trilled articulation of [r] had been replaced by a fricative one, and thus the tie linking the /r/ to the other liquid /l/ had been loosened (for the link tying up the two liquids see *R. Jakobson*, Proceedings, Ghent 1939).

The trends attempting to do away with the ambiguous status of ModE /r/ have not obtained universal acceptance, obviously because cultural and civilizational factors (especially the orthoepic norm) are opposed to such radical solutions. Thus the ModE /r/ remains one of the peripheral elements of its phonematic pattern.

Author's address: Prof. J. Vachek, Nám. Jiřího z Poděbrad 18, Praha 3 (ČSSR).

#### Discussion

*Pilch* (Freiburg i.Br.): Meiner Meinung nach sind altenglisch [χ] und [ɣ] Varianten des gleichen Phonems, und das altenglische *r* war, soweit ich weiß, retroflex.

*Pike (Ann Arbor):* Mr. *Váček* – How would the transformationalist treat the problem you mentioned – and what would be your reaction to their view?

*Answer Váček:* Answering Mr. *Pike's* questions, I must say that the transformationalists have so far – despite all their merits – shown regrettable lack of attention to the dynamic character of language (tensions within its system, including historical development). – Methodological difficulties in the establishment and differentiation of the centre and periphery of the language do exist but they must be tackled. Language being a system in which all levels are interdependent, linguistic methodology must respect this fact. First of all, one should proceed by method of trial and error.