Novella Turrin

THE ACCENT OF THE WEST MIDLANDS

1. Introduction

1.1 English accents

British English is a language of accents. This apparently plain statement actually reveals what is often forgotten or dismissed in current general descriptions of British English. The average learner of the language has been usually exposed to only one variety of it, i.e. what will be labelled from now onwards «neutral accent» or «(current) RP». This pronunciation system is everywhere adopted in the English-speaking world and elsewhere as a reference accent for native speakers as well as for learners of the language. Yet the accent taken as a model is actually one of the many accents spoken in Great Britain, differing from the others in having gradually gained social prestige as well as being used as a standard in the country. This notwithstanding, RP is not the system of pronunciation a foreigner is most likely to hear in Britain, its use being confined to only a small proportion of speakers (about three per cent of the whole population, according to A. Hughes and P. Trudgill (1996) and no more than about ten per cent according to J.C. Wells (1982).

1.2 Does accent matter?

To what extent does accent matter nowadays in Britain? This is one of the possible issues that sociolinguistics applied to the study of British local accents can successfully investigate.

When asked to comment on accent differences in his/her country, region or local area, any native speaker of any lan-
language can generally give some satisfactory – though impressionistic – description. This implies that accent really matters at least in that it enables a listener to locate more or less precisely the geographical origin of his/her interlocutor. In England, accent can do more than that: it can also spot the social background and education of any speaker of the language. Since in England accents are related not only to geographical origin, but also to social evaluation (RP being generally accepted as the non-localizable, upper class and upper-middle class pronunciation system), they seem to play a relevant role in the overall system of social relations, their defining characteristics being exploited for puns and often leading to misunderstandings.

In describing British accents, some words, which focus their salient features, are commonly used. They include terms such as «burr» indicating a type of regional speech in which r sounds are pronounced more noticeably than in the neutral accent (e.g. in Irish accents); «lilt» referring to a way of speaking in which the voice rises and falls in a musical way (once again particularly used to describe Irish, as well as Welsh accents); and «twang» meaning a nasal voice quality. Aesthetic criteria are often associated with specific accents; urban accents are considered to be ugly and harsh as opposed to what are perceived as charming countryside accents. It is possible to explain such widespread aesthetic judgements in terms of phonaesthetics, i.e. the study of the expressive properties of sound. In this respect northern English speech generally sounds like consonantal and harsh to most native speakers, while southern or Irish accents, which are slower in tempo, are perceived as being harmonious. However, the social perspective once again plays an important role in accent evaluation since northern urban accents are generally subject to social prejudice, being often associated with the industrial working-class.

1.3 The scope of the present paper

The present paper is concerned with the phonetic description of the accent of the West Midlands. The aim is a descriptive one, and involves the analysis and illustration of the phonetic features which are typical of this area in the linguistic North of England. The reference accent is here considered RP (Received Pronunciation); all the regional speech characteristics which are outlined are compared to the RP pronunciation sys-
tem. Since the main purpose of the project is to make an account of the current West Midland speech, no previous theoretical standpoint has been chosen as a basis for discussion. This implies that the analysis has been carried out, as it were, from the bottom up, namely starting from the rough data (the recordings of regional speech samples) and then extracting from them the main pronunciation characteristics. The resulting report is meant to constitute a general survey of the West Midland accent. Finer and finer analyses may be offered on this topic, since it is possible to investigate subtle differences between accents belonging to neighbouring localities. This kind of detailed research, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper.

1.4 Coding English sounds

The phonetic alphabet which is used in this work is the International Phonetic Association's alphabet (IPA) in its expanded version canIPA (1997). The standard IPA alphabet is the most widely used set of phonetic symbols and the version canIPA (1997) is an implementation of it, containing much more information and being much more accurate in phonetic detail. Writers on English phonetics have variously used different symbols to represent the same phonemes causing sometimes confusion to the readers. canIPA, too, in supplementing the original IPA version, sometimes modifies the notation of already existing symbols and especially adds new ones so as to code all sounds with great precision on the basis of their articulation.

As far as English phonetics is concerned, it is worth listing some of the conventions which have been changed by the version canIPA (1997). The phoneme which is usually notated as /iː/ becomes /ɪiː/ in the system of phonetic notation used in the present work; the same modification affects the vowel /uː/, which becomes a diphthongal /uʊ/. Further innovations include the choice of the symbol /ɛ/ for what is often written as /e/. The notation of English diphthongs has also been subject to change; the sound that is mainly transcribed as /eɪ/ is changed into /ɛɪ/; /aɪ/ into /æɛ/; /au/ into /əʊ/; /ɔɪ/ into /ɜː/ and what is variously indicated as /əʊ/, /oʊ/ here becomes /aʊ/.

Some diaphonemic symbols are also used in the notation system in question. They indicate by a single symbol the possible variants – used either in the same accent or in different
reference accents – of the phoneme they represent. In other words, the diaphoneme /i/ represents the British English phone-
me /i/ and the American English /ə/, which are both used in the
same context (e.g. in the suffixes -ed, -es, -est, -less). The same
principle applies to the diaphonemes /æ/, /o/, /ɜ/, /ʌ/ (the latter indicating non-prevocalic r, which has no contoidal
realization in non-rhotic accents and a contoidal realization in
rhotic ones).

A narrow phonetic transcription is used in order to achieve
the maximum precision in the description of English sounds. I
have introduced a relevant number of symbols representing the
allophones of the English phonemes which are typically found
in the West Midlands. Detailed phono-tonetic diagrams (Fig. 1)
describe the typical vowel phonemes and intonation patterns of
both RP and the West Midland accent. Vowels and diphthongs
are located in the vowel quadrilaterals, – four-sided diagrams
in which vowels are classified according to their tongue height
and their frontness or backness. Another parameter of vowel
quality which has a bearing on vowel classification is lip-round-
ing 1; on the basis of the presence or absence of this factor, vow-
els have been located in two separate quadrilaterals. In addi-
tion, a complete list of all the phonetic symbols and signs
appearing in this paper is given before the references.

1.5 The linguistic North of England

The West Midland accent is one among the many types of
regional speech making up the variant that I call Northern
English. The linguistic North includes what is normally consid-
ered the geographical North of England, from the Scottish
border to a line from the Mersey to the Humber including also
most of the Midlands. The linguistic North begins from the
Severn-Wash line and stretches northwards as far as the Scott-
ish border. Northern English is thus one of the main varieties
one is likely to hear in England, since its speakers constitute a
high percentage of the overall number of English native speakers.

From a linguistic point of view, the population of England is about
equally divided between the north and the south. If we exclude the

1 Rounded vowels are produced with a particular articulatory setting: the
corners of the lips are brought towards each other and the lips pushed
slightly forward.
"Neutral" modern British accent (present-day "RP")

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/æ/ [ə], [əː, ə#] /e/ [ɛ] /ə/ [ə]
/æ/ [æ] /a/ [ɑ]
/ʌ/ [ʌ] /o/ [o, ɔ]
/i/ [i] /i/ [ɪ]
/u/ [u] /u/ [u]
/e/ [e] /e/ [ɛ]
/o/ [o] /ɔ/ [ɔ]
/ɪ/ [ɪ] /ɪ/ [ɨ]
/ʌɪ/ [ʌi] /aɪ/ [ai]
/ai/ [ai]
/œ/ [œ] /æ/ [æ]
/æ/ [æ]
/ə/ [ə] /a/ [ɑ]
/ʊ/ [ʊ] /u/ [u]
small number of RP speakers (who are scattered throughout the whole country), about half of the English speak with some degree of northern accent. (Wells, 1982: 349).

As it covers a wide area of the country Northern English is not a homogeneous pronunciation system but rather consists of a range of local accents, each having its own identifying features. Nevertheless, a common pattern underlying the various phonetic characteristics can easily be recognized; a set of shared features indeed enables us to define a particular accent as northern and to distinguish it from southern or Scottish accents.

The main phonetic trait identifying northern speech is the lack of the RP distinction between the phonemes /u/ and /ʌ/, so that the first is used in two lexical sets, in words like *put, look* but also in e.g. *but, sbut*. In the North, indeed, the short vowel inventory lacks the phoneme /ʌ/ and is consequently reduced to a five-term system (/ɪ/, /ɛ/, /æ/, /ʊ/, /u/). The other noticeable northern feature is the use of /æ/ (instead of RP /æ:/) in a particular set of words with a following voiceless constrictive or a nasal plus consonant. Words such as *path, bath, past, after, ant, dance, glass, example* are generally effective indicators of a speaker's northern origin if pronounced with the phoneme /æ/, realized as [a]. There are further characteristics which are typical of northern accents in general, such as the use of more open qualities (compared to RP) for short vowels and the frequent monophthongal realizations of the diphthongs /ɛɪ/ and /əʊ/, as in *day* and *road*. Moreover, every large conurbation of the North has a number of idiosyncratic features and the cities of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham are all identified by their own speech.

The southernmost region in the linguistic North of England is covered by the Midlands, the industrial belt stretching from Cheshire through Staffordshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, West Midlands, Warwickshire, Leicestershire and the northern part of Northamptonshire. The most prominent cities in the region are Stoke-on-Trent, Derby, Birmingham, Coventry, Stratford-upon-Avon, Nottingham, Leicester and Lincoln. Obviously, the typically northern pronunciation features are likely to undergo a number of slight changes in the Midlands since this region borders on the geographical and linguistic South. Within the Midlands further subdivisions can be made on the basis of the variation in phonetic and/or phone-
mic characteristics, thus identifying four accent areas. The north-west Midlands area focuses on the cities of Stoke-on-Trent and Derby; the central Midlands include Nottingham and Leicester; the east Midlands' main centres are Lincoln and Grantham and the West Midlands' prominent cities are Birmingham and Coventry.

As mentioned above, northern urban accents are often considered to be harsh, flat or simply unpleasant, the widespread social stereotypes playing a part in this judgement. The distinctive speech used in the main northern cities is particularly liable to such criticism and much social prejudice is attached to the varieties of English spoken in Newcastle, Liverpool and especially Birmingham. Some other accents, though differing in many respects from RP, are generally rated highly; that is the case for instance of Highland Scots and the West Country speech, which are probably associated to a rural and slower life-style in charming environments. Conversely, one is likely to hear people talking about «Geordies» «Scouses» Mancunians and «Brummies» (respectively the native speakers of Tyne & Wear, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham) as easily identifiable speakers.

At the bottom of the hierarchy of accents is Birmingham speech, which is often used for the villains – the «baddies» – in contemporary British TV fiction. This accent is disfavoured for a number of reasons, some of them arbitrary (like perceived associations with an industrial conurbation rather than the charming countryside) and some relating to the lack of a strong literary tradition in this regional variety of English. At another level, speakers of the most disparaged accents are highly rated when compassion, good humour and sociability are at issue. In such contexts, non-standard speech is likely to be more serviceable to the speaker than RP.

2. The Phonetic System

2.1 General features

The West Midland accent area covers a densely populated region of England and includes Britain's second city, Birmingham. Like all large conurbations, the city has developed its own idiosyncratic accent features, which are easily recognizable
by every Briton. Birmingham is affectionately known as «Brum» and its accent and people as «Brummie» and «Brummies». The broad Birmingham accent is still generally regarded as one of the most socially marginalizing ways of talking along with Scouse, Cockney and – in Scotland – the Glasgow accent.

The West Midland linguistic area actually extends far beyond Birmingham, covering the whole West Midlands county as well as parts of south Staffordshire, west Leicestershire, Warwickshire, the eastern parts of Hereford and Worcestershire county, a southern patch of Northamptonshire and the northernmost areas of Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire. Places such as Walsall and Wolverhampton, Coventry, Rugby, Banbury and the medieval towns of Warwick and Stratford-upon-Avon share the same general accent features.

Nevertheless the southern part of this area (approximately south of Coventry) differs in many respects from the rest of the region in showing less marked accent features as well as in using «southern» forms. This slightly dissimilar phonetic system is consistently described in this paper along with the main West Midland variants. It is indeed typical of a zone which might be considered as a southern sub-area within the wide West Midland linguistic region. Likewise, the country area around Wolverhampton and Dudley, known as Black Country, has a distinctive speech, retaining most dialect features which have disappeared from the rest of the Midlands.

One of the main phonological traits identifying the West Midland broad accent is the diphthong shift which is characteristic of Birmingham and is also found in some southern accents such as Cockney, which is widespread in London and the surrounding areas, Essex and Hampshire. Nevertheless, the middle class in the city usually speaks RP or a sort of regional variant of it which may be called «near RP».

In spite of the many southern-like traits this accent retains such salient northern features as the use of the same phoneme /ʊ/ [u] for both put and but and /æ:/ [a] in words such as barb. A detailed representation of the West Midland phonetic and prosodic features is shown in the phono-tonetic diagrams on Fig. 1, where a comparison is made with the RP standard.

The West Midland accent is spoken in one of the more densely populated areas of England and in Britain’s second city (Birmingham and its adjacent suburbs have a population of approximately one million). Its distinctive traits are generally
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known to most Britons who make it the target of a widespread social stigma often associating it with the low urban industrial classes. The Warwickshire region, on the other hand, is interesting in that in its territory many accents come together, thus constituting a kind of transitional zone between the linguistic North and the South.

2.2 Monophthongs

/i/ This phoneme is realized as [iː]. E.g. this, think, give, win, live, sit, fill, rid, lift etc. This front realization is found nowhere else in the North and is typical of the West Midlands. In a less broad accent, however, the lower type [i] is more common. The same variant is found in RP and the southern sub-area within the West Midlands, which has some characteristics of its own, its accent being less marked as well as more southern-like.

/-i/ The morpheme-final vowel in words such as happy, sorry, anyone, very, is typically realized as [-iː]. When the phoneme is in sentence-final position, indeed, a diphthongal realization [-iː] is common. A widespread variant is [-i] in all environments; this form is found in a less broad speech as well as in the current RP, in which [-i] has replaced the traditional [i] in such final unstressed positions.

/iV/ When unstressed /i/ precedes a vowel, it is realized as [i] (e.g. variation, glorious, situation), as in the present-day neutral accent.

/i/ This diaphoneme, which is present in the suffixes -ed, -es, -est, -less is pronounced [i - r] (e.g. wanted, horses, highest). In RP, the most common phone is [i], but [ə] tends to be used in non-final unstressed syllables, especially by younger speakers, who are most likely to adopt this new RP trend. E.g. quality /kwɔləti/, angrily, easily, positive, chocolate, possible, problem, system, useless. The phone [ə] is also common in the prefix be- in certain words such as believe, belong, behind, behave, though [i] remains predominant in begin, between, become.

/e/ This phoneme is realized as [ɛ]. E.g. then, get, yes, head, Thames, many. Less broad West Midland speech has a lower variant, [ɛː]. The RP phone is [ɛ]. It is higher than those used in northern accents, which generally tend to have lower qualities for short vowels as compared to RP realizations.
This vowel is pronounced as [a]. E.g. hat, cat, plaid, marry. The West Midland accent is therefore basically northern in that it has a central realization for /æ/. The southern sub-area has a fronter variant, [a], which is more similar to that of the linguistic South. In the most typical Brummie, words such as band and man, which normally have /æ/, traditionally have /o/. As will be shown below, the broad realization of /o/ is [a], so that the two words above sound respectively like [ʰænd], [ˈmæn]. In the neutral accent this monophthong is pronounced as [æ]. However, it is currently undergoing a realizational change whereby it tends to be lowered and is frequently heard with a quality approaching [a].

The diaphoneme /æ/ represents the two possible realizations of /æ/ – either /a:/ or /æ/ – in a particular set of words, most of them containing a voiceless constrictive, e.g. bath, path, glass, dance, glass, ask, last, pass, past, branch, aunt, advance, after etc. While in American English this diaphoneme is realized as /æ/ [æ], in the British neutral accent it is a long monophthong /a:/, realized as [a:]. The accents of Northern England use the phoneme /æ/ and generally realize it with the central phone [a]. The marked West Midland speech follows the same pattern and has the phone [a:]. This typically northern characteristic is actually shared by the West Midlands only to a certain extent. Birmingham indeed has aunt /ɑːnt/ ['ɒənt] but last /lɑːst/ ['laːst]. This is due to the fact that the isogloss for the phonetically short vowel in aunt runs to the north of the one for last and Birmingham lies between these two lines. In the southern region within the West Midlands, indeed, both aunt and last (and the other words in the group above) may have /a:/ [a:], since this region lies entirely to the south of the two isoglosses. Fluctuation in the pronunciation of these words is however very common. Some informants indeed realize bath as /bɑːθ/ ['bɒəθ], but path as /pæθ/ ['pɑθ]. Variation is even possible in the same word, which may either be realized with /æ/ or /a:/ by the same informant.

This phoneme typically has an unrounded realization, [a], thus undergoing a slight variation as compared with the usually standard [o] form which is found in most English accents. A similar unrounded phone is used in the South West of England as well as in General American. E.g. hot, pot, dog, want. In the southern part of the West Midlands, the rounded forms [o:] and [ɔ] are more common.
/ɒ/ The diaphoneme /ɒ/ marks the distinction between the American and British pronunciations of words such as cloth, long, soft, cross, across, tomorrow, cough, long, having /ɔː/ [ɔː] in General American and a short /ɒ/ [ɒ] in RP. This modification largely affects words having a voiceless constrictive or a nasal following the phoneme. In the West Midlands the diaphoneme /ɒ/ is realized as a short /ɒ/ [ɒ] as well. E.g. long, cloth, cough, cross, Boston, across, soft, tomorrow, off etc. In the southern sub-area /ɒ/ [ɔː] may be similarly used in this set of words, with a possible [ɔ] variant. However, there is also a strikingly different type, which is typical of the West Midlands southern area, whereby the diaphoneme /ɒ/ becomes /ɔː/ [ɔː] mainly in words with a following voiceless constrictive (e.g. off, cloth, soft etc.). As mentioned above, the same applies e.g. to the General American accent, in which /ɒ/ takes the form /ɔː/. Yet the set of words in which /ɔː/ for /ɒ/ is found is larger in General American than in the Midland area under question, since it also involves words in which the vowel is followed by a nasal (e.g. long).

/ʊ/ This phoneme is typically realized as [u]. E.g. book, look, put, cushion, butcher, woman, would. This realization is backer than the one found in the neighbouring central Midlands and the rest of the Midlands as well as in RP ([o]). However, it is typical of broad West Midland speech and is not common in the southern sub-area. In this latter, an unrounded pronunciation, [ʊ], is prevalent, and a rounded form [ʊ] is also present as a variant.

/u/ When unstressed /u/ is followed by a vowel, as in duet, situation, influential it has a high and back realization: [u]. The phone used in the neutral accent is slightly fronter, [ʊ].

/ʌ/ As mentioned above, the West Midland area is to be located in the linguistic North since its accent displays some typically northern traits such as the absence of the phoneme /ʌ/. In Brummie and in the most representative speech this phoneme – which in RP is realized as [ʌ] – is replaced by /u/ [u]. E.g. but, cup, done, London, mother, country, blood, does, southern, enough etc. Nevertheless, within this wide Midland region, the use of /u/ [ʊ] for /ʌ/ may be variable, depending on the speakers’ social class and linguistic awareness as well as the degree of formality required by the situation. As a general rule, the southern parts of this area tend to use /u/ [ʊ, o] for /ʌ/
less consistently. On the other hand, they may even have the phoneme \( /\alpha / \) in their phonemic inventory, and realize it as [u], though unsystematically. This is easily explained by the linguistic nature of this southern region, where many isoglosses meet, creating a sort of transitional area between the North and the South. The word *one* has a different vowel phoneme as compared with the neutral accent and most regional variants, in which it is \( /\alpha / \). As in Stoke-on-Trent, Manchester, Liverpool and Sheffield, *one* is \( /\text{wun}/ \). In the West Midlands, its typical realization is [əwən].

\( /\alpha / \) This unstressed vowel has a realization [ə] as in *above, affect, a man, the man*, while it is pronounced [ɔ] when in sentence-final position, e.g. *letter, doctor, colour, mother, waiter, sofa*. In the latter case, there may also be a frequent variant slightly lower in quality: [ʌ]. Received Pronunciation uses the phone [ə] also in the sequences /ət+z-d/, e.g. *farmers, gingered*.

2.2.2 Long monophthongs

\( /\omega / \) This long monophthong has a diphthongal realization in the most typical West Midland accent, having a peculiar rounded starting point: [ɔɔ]. A less broad variant is the monophthong [æː], which is similar to the neutral realization [æː]. E.g. *car, hard, half, heart, clerk* etc.

\( /\varepsilon / \) This phonem is typically realized as a narrow diphthong, having a rounded starting point: [ɛː]. E.g. *fur, word, her, girl, work, earth, skirt* etc. A less marked variant is the monophthong [ɛ] or, in fewer cases, one of a central type [æ]. The phone used in the standard accent is lower in quality, [æː]. This sound also realizes the English hesitation pause, which is often written as *er* in the spelling form. The neutral accent has a phone which is in the region of [ə(:)] or [ə(:)]. Other regional accents, e.g. Liverpool and Birmingham, have different qualities. Scouse – the accent of Liverpool – uses a lower phone of the type [ɛː] or [æː]. Brummitt, on the other hand, has a likewise front realization, but the phone is higher than in Liverpool: [ɛːː]. Both, however, are audibly distinguishable from the RP form.

\( /\varepsilon / \) The most common realization of this phoneme is a diphthong [ʊʊ], having an unusually high starting point. E.g. *saw, horse, small, court, cause, daughter, water, bought* etc. A possible milder variant is [ʊʊ]. Words such as *force, four, wore,*
borne, sport, more, having r in the spelling, in the typical West Midland and Brummie accent have the phoneme /ɔə/, which has now been displaced by /ɔː/ in the neutral accent as well as in a number of regional variants. The West Midland typical speech is thus conservative in this respect, retaining the historical contrast between /ɔə/ and /ɔː/. In this accent, the diphthong /ɔə/ actually corresponds to the phonemic sequence /auə/, which is composed of the closing diphthong /au/ ([au]) plus an /ə/ glide. The broad realization of /ɔə/ is therefore: /ɔə/ = /auə/ [au, au#. E.g. more [maʊə]. In the West Midland southern sub-area, the contrast between the two phonemes /ɔə/ and /ɔː/ has been lost and words such as more and four are normally pronounced with /ɔː/ [ɔɔ]. The realization of this long monophthong in RP is [ɔ:]. As mentioned above, the sequences /ɔː(+$-{d#})(V)/ are realized with [ɔː] as well, e.g. cord, lord, paws, pause, paused. Occasionally they can also be realized as [ɔː, ɔː#, ɔː#V].

2.3 Closing diphthongs

/ɪi/ The diphthong has a characteristic form in this region, having a noticeably lower first element and a backer glide than the rest of English northern accents. The form thus produced is [ɔi], whereas in RP it is [ɪi]. E.g. tea, sees, field, key, police, sea, be, these, feet etc. The quality of the starting point is due to the diphthong shift which affects all closing diphthongs in the West Midlands and is described in the following sections. The less marked variant is similarly anomalous, starting from a central position: [i].

/ɛi/ In the most typical Brummie as well as in the broad West Midland accent, there is a shift in the starting points of the closing diphthongs, which we may refer to as diphthong shift. It is interesting to note that this process is one of the most typical characteristics of another important urban accent, i.e. Cockney, but has also spread to the local speech of much of the South of England, as well as – outside Britain – Australia and New Zealand. Probably this process originated in London, presumably during the first half of the nineteenth century and then spread towards the Midlands. The diphthong shift causes a rearrangement of the closing diphthong system whereby /ɛi/ shifts forwards to [æi] (for the shifted realizations of the other closing diphthongs see below). E.g. day, rain, eight,
they, great, steak, break, late etc. The word steak, for instance, is pronounced /steɪk/ ['steɪk] in the broad West Midland accent. As a consequence, a word like paper /ˈpeɪpər/, locally pronounced as ['pʰəpər], may sound like piper /ˈpærəpər/ to an outside speaker. However, less broad local speakers may realize /ei/ as [ɛi] and pronounce e.g. steak as ['steɪk]. This type is frequent in the southern sub-area, which tends to use less marked forms similar to the RP standard, i.e. [ɛi].

/æ/ This phoneme is also typically affected by the diphthong shift, having a rounded back central starting point: [ɔi], which makes it remarkably different from the RP standard [æː]. Once again, some ambiguities may arise when hearing e.g. the word by uttered in a broad accent, since it may sound rather similar to the standard pronunciation of boy. The variant [ɔi], having a very back starting point, may be used by less broad Birmingham speakers. Lexical items containing this phoneme are e.g. my, fight, pie, cry, right etc. The word my /maɪ/, for instance, may be either realized as ['mɔɪ] in a marked accent, or as ['mɔɪ] in a less broad form. Moreover, a third option is available, whereby unstressed my is pronounced ['mi]. This latter possibility, however, is confined to old and broad speakers and is not frequently used.

/aʊ/ This diphthong has a distinctive quality in a typical West Midland accent, having a half-low starting point and a rounded half-high glide: [ɛʊ]. Two frequent variants have also been recorded in the less broad local speech, i.e. the peculiar [ʌx] (having an unrounded glide) and [æʊ]. The realization of this diphthong in the neutral accent is [aʊ]. E.g. now, house, town etc.

/ɔe/ The most typical version of this diphthong is [ɔi]. E.g. boy, noise, toy, voice etc. The starting point of the diphthong has thus shifted from the /ɔ/ region towards the /u/ area on the vowel quadrilateral, thus giving the type [ɔ]. In the southernmost West Midlands, more standard-like forms are usually heard. The main realization here is [ɔi], with a possible variant [ɔɪ] having the same starting point as the RP form [ɔɪ]. These forms are also present in the rest of the West Midlands, in non-broad varieties of speech.

/au/ This diphthong seems to be usually subject to much variation within English dialects. In the West Midlands it has a peculiar quality, which is produced by the diphthong shift: [ʌʊ]. This variant is easily distinguishable from the other north-
ern versions since its starting point is unrounded. This phoneme is present in words such as no, so, home, know, toast, road, etc. The pronunciation of a word such as no /nəʊ/, when uttered in a prominent accent, is /nau/, and may therefore sound similar to what is generally the phonemic sequence for now, i.e. /nəʊ/. Along with /əu/, a typical variant occurring in the environment of a following /l/ is commonly used: /əu/. E.g. goal, cold, whole, soul, shoulder etc. A very similar type is used throughout the Midlands, including the central and the east Midlands. In a less broad West Midland accent, the diphthong is affected by no shift and is mostly realized as /oʊ/ or /ʊəʊ/ and has the same /əʊ/ variant in front of /l/, as in goal /ɡəʊl/ [ɡʊəʊl]. Received Pronunciation realizes it as [əʊ]. When the phoneme is followed by the alveo-velar lateral [ɻ], it is realized as [ʊəʊ].

/(j)u/ A narrow shifted closing diphthong is typical of marked West Midland speech: [ɾu], as opposed to the RP standard ([j]u). E.g. two, few, rude, food, soup, through, fruit. As for the preceding phoneme, the starting point is unusually unrounded, as a result of the overall rearrangement brought about by the diphthong shift. In addition, the diphthong glide may be slightly modified, moving towards a backer position when dark /l/ follows, as in fool /fuʊl/ [fuʊl]. In a less marked regional speech, the realization of /(j)u/ is strikingly different. Both elements are fronted, giving an easily recognizable form [usahaan]. When preceding dark /l/, the diphthong takes the form [ʊə]. Words having -ook in the spelling (e.g. book, cook, look) retain the typically northern pronunciation with /u/ ([ɾu]) only in old-fashioned speech; otherwise they are commonly pronounced with /u/ ([ɾu]). In Birmingham, however, there is a case of a different lexical incidence concerning the word tooth. In the most representative accent the vowel phoneme in tooth may be /u/ [ʊ], as opposed to the /u/ of the neutral and most English accents.

2.4 Centring diphthongs

/əʊ/ A narrow diphthong is typically produced, having a comparatively close starting point: [əʊ]. E.g. there, care, hair, Mary. Another popular variant is the form [əʊ] or, less frequently, even with a lower first element and a central glide: [əʊ]. The types [əʊ] and [əʊ] belong to a less broad regional
speech as compared with [εə]. The pronunciation of this centring diphthong in the neutral accent is [εə]. Current developments involve its possible monophthongal realization as [εi].

/ɪə/ The quality of this phoneme is [ɪə] (e.g. fears, fierce, material, weird). When the diphthong precedes a sentence boundary, the form [ɪə] is pronounced, as in here, idea, dear etc. In RP there is a less high and front starting point, [ɪə, ʊə#].

/(j)ʊə/ The most typical pronunciation for this closing diphthong in the West Midlands is [(j)ʊə, (j)ʊə] while RP has [(j)ʊə, (j)ʊə#]. E.g. pure, sure, poor, tour, curious, during, fluent, usual etc. The coalescence of this diphthong with /æ/ – which is a widespread phenomenon in RP and a lot of regional accents – is often heard in the speech of younger speakers. In words such as poor, they use /ɔ:/ and realize it as [ʊə] (which is the non-broad realization of the phoneme), thus pronouncing it as [ˈphʊə].

2.5 Some consonants

/ɪ/, /ʃ/ The accent spoken in the West Midlands is non-rhotic like RP and most English regional accents. Prevocalic /ɪ/ is therefore pronounced, while in all other positions (as represented by the diaphone /ɪ/) it has no contoidal realization. Prevocalic /ʃ/ is realized as a postalveolar contracted approximant, [ɻ], as in RP. Less frequently, an alveolar tap [ɾ] may be heard, especially in intervocalic position (as in e.g. sorry) and after bilabial consonants, (as in e.g. bridge). The usage of intrusive /ʃ/ links – i.e. the insertion of /ʃ/ not justified by the spelling in word-final position before a word beginning with a vowel – is widespread in both RP and all regional varieties, even though consciously stigmatized. «Intrusive /ʃ/» is used particularly after final /ɔ/, but can also occur after /ʊ/ or /ɔ/, e.g. in the RP versions of idea of /eaɪdɪəv/, law and order /laːən ˈɔːdə/, I saw it /eaˈsəːv/. In RP and the West Midlands it is usually realized as [ɻ]. An alternative realization for /ʃ/ in RP is worth mentioning, namely a voiced labiodental approximant [ʊ]. Though this version is often regarded as a speech defect, it is a widespread feature of Cockney and other urban varieties.

/h/, /h/ In the West Midland accent, as well as in most other English regional variants, /h/ is normally dropped and is
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retained only in careful speech. Conversely, this consonant, when present in the spelling, is in most cases pronounced in RP. However, there are some words in which \( h \) is regularly «dropped» in all British accents – initially in *hour, honest, honour, heir, heiress*; in medial position in *exhaust, exhilarate, exhibit, vehicle, vehement*. Also, it is not pronounced in some suffixes such as -ham, e.g. *Durham, Clapham* but also *shepherd*. In connected speech, weak non-initial forms of certain function words such as *have, has, had*, personal pronouns and adjectives commonly lose /h/ both in the neutral and all regional speech. The diaphoneme /h/, indicating the possible realizations of /h/ in the spelling form *wh*-., is realized as [Ø] in both RP and most regional accents, included the variety spoken in the West Midlands; words such as *when, what, while* have no initial /h/ phoneme. In the neutral accent, word-medially between voiced sounds, /h/ is often realized with the voiced allophone [ɦ]: e.g. *behind, perhaps, ahead, anyhow, behave.*

/ŋ/ In RP, in word-medial position /ŋ/ is realized as [ŋ] in words such as *singer, hanger, longing*, while it is [ŋŋ] in *finger, anger, hung, single*, singly, strongest, angle, England. When the spelling form ng is at the end of a word or stem, it is pronounced as [ŋ], e.g. *hearing, wedding, hang, sings, wrong(-s, -ed), tongue, among, strongly*. The north-west Midlands, West Midlands, Merseyside, central Lancashire and Greater Manchester have the same typical realization of this phoneme: [ŋŋ]. It is found both word-medially and word-finally, e.g. *longing, tongue, singer, hanger* and *sing, hang, twang, long, wrong, among*. In all the North West of England, indeed, [ŋ] is deprived of its phonemic status, being only an allophone of /n/ occurring before /g, k/. Similarly, in most of the occurrences of the suffix -ing /-ŋ/ as in *singing, morning, during, wedding* etc., the prevalent realization is /-ŋŋ/ [-ŋŋ] ([-in] being a widespread variant). Some informants often make an inconsistent use of final /ŋ/, choosing either [ŋ] or [ŋŋ] indifferently. In the West Midland southern sub-area, the forms [ŋŋ] and [-ŋŋ] are not common. Instead, the most widespread types are the standard and southern-like [ŋ] and [-n ~ -n]. The isogloss for /ŋ/ as [ŋŋ] runs therefore across the West Midland region and places such as southern Warwickshire lie to the south of it.

/j/, /ʃ/ As far as the sequence /juː/ is concerned, in RP and most English accents the sequence the phoneme /ʃ/ is usually pronounced after plosives, nasals, the labiodental con-
strictives /t, d/ and the glottal approximant /h/, as in beauty, new, duke, tube, few, view, human. In words such as value, where /l/ follows a stressed vowel, /j/ is retained as well. This implies that the diaphone /j/, indicating the possible pronunciations of /j/ after such consonants as /n, t, d/, is generally realized as [j], even if a new pronunciation trend involves the loss of /j/ even after /n/. E.g. tune, during, new, neutral. However, the sequences /tj, dj, sj, zj/, whenever not carrying word-stress, commonly become [tʃ, dʃ, ʃ, ʒ], except in careful speech. E.g. statue, educate, issue, usual, pursuit. In the case of stressed /sj/ and /zj/ pronunciations without /j/, [s] and [z], are increasingly used, as in the words supermarket, presume. On the whole, current distributional changes in pronunciation seem to imply the loss of /j/ when it follows /s/, /l/ or /s/, as in fruit, crude, rude, lute, allure, allude, absolutely, super. In the West Midlands the phoneme /j/ and the diaphone /j/ follow the same pattern as in RP and in most regional variants. E.g. yes, union, year, Europe, cure, huge, familiar etc. A different distribution is only typical of the south-eastern part of the Midlands, where /j/ has no contoidal realization and words such as music, news have the phonemic sequence /u/ (/mʌzɪk/, /njuз/). In the West Midlands, the sequence /ju/ has generally a sounded /j/ in words such as beauty, few, view, human etc. whereas in words such as tune, during, where /j/ follows /t, d/, the plosives may coalesce into /tʃ, dʃ/ (this type of coalescence, also called palatalization, may be found in all British accents). The sequences /tj, dj/ are thus typically realized as [tʃh, dʃ], but the alternative versions [tʃ, dʃ] are also heard. The word new /nju:/ is often pronounced as [njuɻ], where /j/ has no contoidal realization (thus following the same pattern as in the southern east Midlands). There seems to be an increasing tendency to use alternative pronunciations in which /j/ is regularly absent following /n/ in stressed syllables. This trend is growing common in the most dynamic English accents, RP included.

/ʃ/ Lodge (1984) remarks that in a broad West Midland accent the voiceless plosives are rarely aspirated. As in RP, this plosive is realized as an alveolar, [f], but may be frequently replaced by a glottal stop, [ʔ]. Younger speakers tend to use the glottal plosive more often than the older ones, particularly word-finally and preceding a consonant, or as a reinforcement of the voiceless plosives. The glottal plosive is regularly used in
the neutral accent as a reinforcement of any initial vowel when
the word is meant to have particular prominence, e.g. It's old
/itsəuld/. Also, its usage is widespread as a syllable boundary
marker, when the following syllable begins with a stressed
vowel, as in reaction /rɛkˈʃən/ so as to avoid a vowel hiatus
and, similarly, in those cases where intrusive /æ/ is most likely
to occur, e.g. law and order, idea of. In addition, a glottal
plosive may be introduced as a reinforcement of voiceless plo-
sives in stressed syllable-final position followed by a consonant
or a pause (e.g. put, lock, jump). When in syllable-final posi-
tion and followed by a consonant, /p, t, k/ may also be re-
placed by [ʔ]. /t/, in particular, often becomes [ʔ] when the
following consonant is /t/, /d/, /dʒ/, /ŋ/ and /l/, e.g. that
trip, not now, Scotland. Moreover, the glottal plosive can fre-
cently replace /t/ before other plosives (as in football, catkin)
and before any non-syllabic consonant, especially /n/, /j/, /w/,
/s/ (e.g. right now, witness, not yet, catwalk, outright, outrun).

/l/ In RP and most regional varieties alveolar (or «clear [l]»)
is used in prevocalic position and before /j/, as in the words
look, letter, late, player, million. It is also used in word-final
position, when followed by a vowel or /j/ (e.g. spell it, will
you). Alveo-velar (or dark) [ɬ] is always pronounced before
consonants, /w/ or word-boundaries, as in small, told, style. In
word-final position following a consonant, syllabic dark [ɬ] is
used: e.g. middle, final, angle. Both clear and dark /l/, as well
as syllabic /l/ can be partly or completely devoiced in certain
environments. When [l] follows voiceless plosives in stressed
syllables, it is entirely devoiced, as in please, plot, climb, apply.
It is partly devoiced when it follows voiceless plosives in un-
stressed syllables or across syllable boundaries, as in butler,
short loan, dark lane. Syllabic [ɬ] is partially devoiced when
following voiceless consonants, e.g. little, awful, simple. In the
West Midlands the allophones of /l/ have in most cases the
same distribution as in RP. In a strong West Midland accent,
however, /l/ may be velarized in all positions, as happens in
some northern localities (e.g. Leeds). Furthermore, in a broad
accent there are some instances of the idiosyncratic variant [ɬ]
which has been recorded for the neighbouring Greater Man-
chester and the north-west Midlands. This intermediate quality,
between clear and dark /l/, may be used before vowels, e.g.
land (whereas RP has [l]).
2.6 Some phonetic rules

(V)VC Long vowels and diphthongs, when stressed and preceding fortis (also called voiceless) consonants or unstressed syllable(s) generally undergo shortening in RP and southern accents, e.g. *feet* [ˈfiːt] vs. *fee(d)* [ˈfiː(d)], *feeding* [ˈfriːdiŋ]. In the typical West Midland speech this rule does not apply since this accent behaves in a characteristic northern way. The diphthongs and the long monophthong in words such as *boot, feet, horses, during, bearing, tourist* etc. are therefore subject to no shortening. *Feet* and *fee(d)*, for instance, have the same vowel length: /iː/ [iː].

Smoothing Smoothing is a widespread realizational process involving the production of RP closing diphthongs. When /æə/ , /əʊə/, /ɛɪə/, /ɔɪə/, /iɪə/, /ouə/ occur in the environment of a following vowel, particularly /ə/, they can be realized as centring diphthongs. Moreover, the centring diphthongs which have been derived from smoothing may even become monophthongs. This is a widespread phenomenon in the British neutral accent, so that e.g. the sequence /æər/ [æəɹ] becomes [ɑɹ, ɑɹ#], as in *fire*; the se sequence /əʊər/ [əʊəɹ, əʊə#] becomes [əɹ, əɹ#], and even [ɑɹ, ɑɹ#], e.g. *tower, power*. Further realizations are [ɛɪə, ɛɪɹ#, ɛɹ, ɛɹ#] for /ɛɪə/, as in *player* (whereas the diphthong /ɛə/, as in *there*, is realized as [ɛə]); [ɔəɹ, ɔəɹ#, ɔɹ, ɔɹ#] for /ɔəɹ/, as in *lower* (whereas it is often realized as a long monophthong [ɔː]= /ɔː/); [ɜəɹ, ɜəɹ#, ɜɹ, ɜɹ#] for /ɜəɹ/, as in *buoyant, annoying* (whereas the sequence /ɔə/², as in *more, door, four* may have the same realization: [ɔə, ɔɹ#]); [iɪə, iɪɹ#, iɹ, iɹ#] for /iɪə/, as in *seer* (whereas the centring diphthong /ɪə/ is [ɪə, ɪɹ#]); and finally [muə, muɹ#, μɹ, μɹ#] for /ouə/, as in *pure, newer, brewery* (whereas the centring diphthong /ʊə/ may be [ʊɹ, ʊɹ#]). On the whole, smoothing is frequently heard in words such as *fire* and *flower* (having either /æə/ + /ə/ or /əʊə/ + /ə/), while it is less common in sequences such as [ɛɪə] (e.g. *player*) and [ɔəɹ] (as in *employer*). In most northern accents as well as

² The formerly existing contrast between the phonemes /ɔə/ and /əɹ/ has died out in the current neutral accent, being retained only by some older speakers. Pairs of words such as *saw-sore* have therefore the same phoneme /ɔə/. The loss of /əɹ/ from the phoneme inventory of current RP is now completed.
in the West Midland region the diphthongs which are followed by an /ə/ glide are not smoothed (so that the three vowels are kept distinct in pronunciation). In words such as fire, flower, player, employer etc., the second element of the diphthongs is not omitted, so that the phonetic sequences /æ, u/, /ə, ə/, /e/ + /ə/ maintain their full quality.

Phonetic Symbols

1. Vowels

Unrounded vowels: [i] (high front, e.g. RP y in happy); [ɪ] (high front-central, e.g. Brummie y /ɪ⁄ [-əʃ] in happy); [i] (front half-high, e.g. starting point of RP eɪ /ɪ/ [ɪ] in tea); [ɪ] (front-central half-high, e.g. RP i in fit); [ɪ] (central half-high, e.g. starting point of the diphthong /ɪ/ as in tea in some WM³ realizations + diaphonemic symbol representing BE /ɪ/ and GA /ə/ in the suffixes -ed, -es, -est, -less. E.g. BE or GA e in horses); [u] (back-central half-high, e.g. southern WM u /ʌ/ in cup); [e] (front high-mid, e.g. Brummie e /ɛ/ [ɛ] in there); [ə] (front-central high-mid, e.g. RP a /æ/ [ə] in time); [ə] (central high-mid, e.g. RP a in above); [y] (back-central high-mid, e.g. possible in WM /æo/ [əx] in e.g. now); [ɪ] (front low-mid, e.g. RP e /ɛ/ in get); [ɜ] (front-central low-mid, e.g. WM e /ɛə/ [ɜ] in there); [ɛ] (central low-mid, e.g. RP or /ə:/ in word); [ɛ] (back-central low-mid, e.g. WM er /ə#/ in letter); [ɛ] (front half-low, e.g. possible e /ɛ/ in WM get); [ə] (front-central half-low, e.g. possible starting point of the diphthong /əo/ in WM now); [ɛ] (central half-low, e.g. RP er /ə#/ in letter and u /ʌ/ in cup); [ɒ] (back-central half-low, e.g. possible WM er /ə#/ in letter); [æ] (front low, e.g. RP a in cat); [æ] (diaphonemic symbol indicating BE /æ:/ and GA /æ/ in e.g. path, bath, dance, sample, ask etc.); [ɑ] (low front-central, e.g. possible southern WM a in cat); [a] (low central, e.g. WM a in cat); [ɔ] (low back-central, e.g. RP a in car); [ɔ] (low back, e.g. part of Brummie realization of /ə:/ [əʊə], as in car)

Rounded vowels: [u] (high central. Possible glide of the diphthong /uə/ in e.g. WM two); [ʊ] (high back-central, e.g. the u in RP situation); [ʊ] (high back, e.g. possible glide of the

³ WM: West Midlands; BE: British English; GA: General American.
diphthong /iu/ [ɪu] in RP two; [ʉ] (half-high central, possible glide of the diphthong /aw/ in e.g. Brummie now); [ɑ] (half-high back-central, as in RP u in put); [u] (back half-high, as in WM u in put); [œ] (high-mid central, e.g. in Brummie /ɔː/ [ɔə] as in word); [o] (high-mid back-central, possible in the WM realization of the phoneme /ɔː/ [ɔo], as in saw); [o] (back high-mid, possible in a WM version of the phoneme /ɔː/ [ɔo], as in saw); [ɔ] (central low-mid, possible in WM ow /ɔw/ [ɔo] as in low); [ɔ] (back-central low-mid, e.g. possible glide of the diphthong ow /ɔw/ [ɔo] in RP now); [o] (back low-mid, e.g. the RP realization of aw /aw/ [ɔː] in saw); [o] (back-central half-low, possible in the WM realization of ow /ɔw/ [ɔo] as in low); [ɔ] (back half-low, possible in the WM realization of ow /ɔw/ [ɔo] in front of /l/, as in goal); [ɔ] (low back-central, e.g. in the Brummie realization of a /ɔː/ [ɔo] in car); [o] (low back, like the RP realization of o /ɔ/ [ɔ] in hot); [o] (diaphonic symbol indicating BE /ɔ/ and GA /ɔː/ in e.g. cough, Boston, cross, long etc.).

2. Consonants

Nasals: [m] (voiced bilabial, e.g. RP m in man); [n] (voiced labiodental, e.g. RP m in comfort); [ŋ] (voiced velar, e.g. RP ng in thing).

Plosives: [p] (voiceless bilabial, e.g. RP p in put); [t] (voiceless alveolar, e.g. RP t in tall); [ɾ] (voiceless postalveolar, e.g. RP t in true); [k] (voiceless velar, e.g. RP k in kid); [b] (voiceless bilabial, e.g. RP b in boat); [d] (voiceless alveolar, e.g. RP d in deep); [ʒ] (voiceless postalveolar, e.g. RP d in draw); [g] voiced velar, e.g. RP g in get); [ʔ] (glottal, e.g. RP t in not now).

Grooved half-plosives: [ɾ] (voiceless postalveolar-palatal, e.g. RP ch in chin); [ʤ] (voiced postalveolar-palatal, e.g. RP j and dg in judge).

Constrictives: [f] (voiceless labiodental, e.g. RP f in full); [θ] (voiceless dental, e.g. RP th in thin); [v] (voiced labiodental, e.g. RP v in voice); [ð] (voiced dental, e.g. RP th in that).

Grooved constrictives: [s] (voiceless dental, e.g. RP s in send); [ʃ] (voiceless postalveolar-palatal, e.g. RP sh in shop); [z] (voiceless dental, e.g. RP z in crazy); [ʒ] (voiced postalveolar-palatal, e.g. RP s in leisure).

Approximants: [v] (voiced labiodental, e.g. r in red in Cock-
ney); [j] (voiced palatal, e.g. RP y in yes); [j] (diaphonemic symbol indicating the possible pronunciations of /j/ (as [j] or [\]) after such consonants as /n, t, d/). E.g. the u in tune, during; the ew in new; the eu in neutral etc.); [w] (voiced velar labial, e.g. RP w in we); [h] (voiceless glottal, e.g. RP b in bat); [h] (diaphonemic symbol indicating the possible realizations of /h/ in the spelling form wh- as [\] or [h]. E.g. the h in when, what, while); [i] (voiced glottal, e.g. RP b in behind).

Contracted approximants: [l] (voiced postalveolar, e.g. RP r in red); [l] (voiced prvelar-labial e.g. GA r in red); [l] (diaphonemic symbol indicating the possible realizations of non-prevocalic r – e.g. car, hard, short – either as [\] in non-rhotic accents or /l/ in rhotic accents).

Taps: [r] (voiced alveolar, e.g. possible WM intervocalic r as in sorry).

Laterals: [l] (voiced alveolar, e.g. RP l in lake); [\] (voiced alveo-velar, e.g. RP l in fill); [\] (voiced alveo-velar intermediate between /l/ and /\/; e.g. WM prevocalic l as in land).

**Diacritics and Phonetic Signs**

[i] indicates full length of the preceding vowel (e.g. RP /\:/ in car); [i] indicates half length of the preceding vowel (e.g. RP /\:/ in horse); [i] primary stress (e.g. RP cinema /s\in\ə\m\a\/); [i] secondary stress (e.g. RP phonetician /f\ə\n\ə\t\i\ʃ\ə\n\/); [i] more open quality (e.g. [\o\-i]); [i] closer quality (e.g. [\o\-\-i]); [i] retracted position (e.g. [\o\+i]); [i] advanced position (e.g. [\o\+\-i]); [i] more open and backer quality (e.g. [\o\+\-i]); [i] closer and fronter quality (e.g. [\o\+\-i]); [i] more open and fronter quality (e.g. [\o\-\-i]); [i] closer and backer quality (e.g. [\o\-\-i]); [i] devoiced lenis consonant (e.g. [\y]); [i] unstressed vowel (e.g. [\+i]); [i] syllabic consonant (e.g. [\m\], [\n\], [\ŋ\], [\l\], [\\]); [\] or [\0] zero element; [\#] sentence boundary, end of utterance (e.g. [\#\#]); / / notation in slant brackets represents phonemic transcription. All the relevant standard information about the allophonic realizations of phonemes in different environments must be assumed to be implied by this transcription. [ ] notation in square brackets represents phonetic transcription and is used in quoting examples drawn from the data of the research. [+] is realized as, becomes; V any vowel; C any consonant; Italics indicates orthographic form.
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ABSTRACT

The present paper is concerned with the phonetic description of the accent of the West Midlands. The aim is a descriptive one, and involves the analysis and illustration of the phonetic features which are typical of this area in the linguistic North of England. The reference accent is here considered RP (Received Pronunciation); all the regional speech characteristics which are outlined are compared to the RP pronunciation system.

KEY WORDS