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Discriminating between the major accents of English

Bakalářská práce

Studijní program: B7507 Specializace v pedagogice
Studijní obory: Anglický jazyk se zaměřením na vzdělávání
                              Humanitní studia se zaměřením na vzdělávání

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Zadání bakalářské práce

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HUGHES, Arthur, and Peter TRUDGILL. English Accents and Dialects: An Introduction to Social and Regional Varieties of English in the British Isles. London: Arnold, 1996.

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Tato bakalářská práce je zaměřena na rozlišování dvou různých akcentů anglického jazyka, se kterými se studenti setkávají nejčastěji. Do styku s nimi mohou přijít jak při výuce, tak zejména mimo ni, například v anglických médiích. Součástí této práce je teoretická a praktická část. Teoretická část obsahuje informace k pojmu ,akcent'. Zde je pojem definován a jsou vysvětleny důvody, proč se jednotlivé akcenty liší a co je ovlivňuje. Kromě toho jsou zde představeny dva základní přízvuky, a to přízvuk britský a americký. Ty jsou nejprve popsány a poté jsou zde uvedeny patrné rozdíly mezi nimi. Praktická část obsahuje výzkum prováděný na skupině současných studentů prvního ročníku oboru Angličtina ve vzdělávání na Technické univerzitě v Liberci. Zde je nejprve představen dotazník, díky kterému bylo možné určit, jakými dvěma akcenty by se tato práce měla zaobírat, a následně také test, jehož cílem bylo zjistit, do jaké míry jsou studenti schopni mezi nimi rozlišovat. V závěrečné části jsou shrnuty a vyhodnoceny výsledky těchto průzkumů.

Klíčová slova:

Fonologie, akcent, přízvuk, americký, britský, RP, General American, Standard American, rozmanitost, jazykověda, rozlišování, jazyk, charakteristika, výslovnost, TUL, bakalářská práce

Abstract

This bachelor's thesis focuses on discriminating between two different accents of the English language with which the students come into contact the most. They can encounter them either in the classroom, but mainly outside them, for example in English media. The thesis is divided into a theoretical section and a practical one. The theoretical section consists of information on the term 'accent' itself. Here, the term is defined and the reasons for variation between accents are explained. In addition, the two main accents of the thesis are presented, that is the British and the American accent. These are firstly described and then the perceptible differences between them are introduced. The practical section concerns the actual research, for which the current first year students of English of the Technical University in Liberec were selected. Here, the questionnaire used to discover what accents should be researched is displayed, as well as the test, which was used to see how well can the students discriminate between them. Lastly, in the conclusion, the results of both of these experiments are introduced and analysed.

Keywords:

Contents

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List of Symbols and Abbreviations Used

GenAm – General American accent

IPA – International Phonetic Alphabet

LI2BE – Linguistics II: Phonetics and Morphology

RP – Received Pronunciation

StAmE – Standard American English

TUL – Technical University of Liberec

Introduction

This bachelor thesis deals with an analysis of the segmental phonology of two major English accents, specifically that of the American and British English. The principal aims of the thesis are threefold: to identify which major native speaker accents of English the students of the Technical University of Liberec encounter; to describe these in further detail by characterising their distinctive features in which they might vary; and lastly assess whether or not the students tested can differentiate between them.

I decided to choose the topic because English accents have always been an interest of mine. To me, the origins of accents and the differences between them seem fascinating, as no two accents are the same, yet they belong to the same language: English. I have always tried to estimate where a person is from based only on their voice and the way they say particular words. Furthermore, soon after I began watching English media, I started to notice if an actor is trying to replicate a certain accent in a film and wanted to know what exactly one would have to do in order to reproduce an accent. In addition, native accents are not really taken into consideration in Czech coursebooks and I was interested in knowing if the students who decided to study English at a university can spot the differences.

This thesis consists of a theoretical framework and a practical analysis. The theoretical framework is based on relevant literature and concentrate on introducing the topic of accents and the two main accents themselves. Firstly, the term accent and its definition is described in detail. Furthermore, several factors which influence the formation of an accent and its evolution through time will be mentioned. The main goal of the literary research was, however, to find and describe the perceptive differences between the two accents. Therefore, at the end of the theoretical framework, the two main accents are described. Furthermore, the pronunciation features, which make these accents recognisable from one another, are described and used as a basis for the subsequent test in the practical part.

The practical analysis explains the research methodology for this thesis. Here, the two ways of obtaining data are described and evaluated. These are the questionnaire, which served to find out what two accents the students would be able to recognise, and the test which, was used to evaluate how well they can discriminate between them. Firstly, the questionnaire is

presented. Its questions and the reasoning behind them is discussed. The group for which these questions were designed is profiled. Then the test, which is based on the differences presented in the theoretical section, is presented; its individual tasks are shown and explained. Finally, the results of the test are assessed based on quantitative analysis and commented on.

1 Theoretical Section

The theoretical section provides information about accents. It describes the term itself and compares different definitions used for the term. Based on the discussion of the terminology, I selected what I considered to be the most appropriate term which best fits the purposes of this thesis. Then, based on academic sources, this work explores how different accents occur and introduces factors that influence one's accent. Finally, the two main accents used for the purposes of the research are introduced and their distinctive features, which are used to differentiate between them are described. These characteristics are crucial for the later research, as they are used as the basis for the test.

1.1 The definition of Accent

It is crucial for understanding this thesis to properly determine, what the term 'accent' incorporates. To do so, it is essential to differentiate it from another, closely related linguistic term, which is 'dialect'. Dialect is generally used to refer to differences at all linguistic levels; that is grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. For example: in the American dialect, the word *chips* corresponds to the word *crisps* in the British dialect. Accent, however, refers only to variations in pronunciation. Being a pronunciation variety of the speech of a group of people, accent includes the use of vowel or consonant sounds and particular intonational, rhythmic and other prosodic features. An accent, is therefore to be distinguished from the term 'dialect', since the latter applies to grammar and vocabulary only. However, both terms are often used interchangeably by linguists and lay people alike, as they do not wish to or may not be able to distinguish between the two. For linguists, this is especially true in North America, where 'dialect' can refer to a characteristic combination of phonetic features, which would otherwise be perceived as 'accent'. (Hughes, Trudgill and Watt 2013) There is also one other meaning of accent, which, according to Crystal (2008), is defined as: "The emphasis which makes a particular word or syllable stand out in a stream of speech…" In this sense, accent is derived from the general term 'stress' which is used to refer to every sort of prominence or to the effort made when making a stressed syllable or word.

For the purposes of this thesis I will adhere to the first definition mentioned in the previous paragraph, provided by Hughes in his introduction to *English Accents & Dialects*. 'Accent' will therefore be used in this work only to refer to variations in pronunciation.

1.2 Reasons for Variations between Accents

The fundamental reason for differences between various accents is the evolution of language. English pronunciation has always changed and continues to do so over time. At the same time, the differences which have become established in different places and among different social groups have not been identical. Today's pronunciation patterns reflect the changes which have taken place in history, modifying earlier pronunciation patterns. The reason behind the origin of these innovations and their spread can be explained in several ways.

One popular view mentioned by Wells suggests that all change is 'decay and corruption', and that new pronunciation patterns are a result of human laziness. As he later admits, however, such an explanation is absurd if we take it as the sole reason for change in language. Yet he concedes that it has an element of truth to it. The 'principle of least effort' leads us to pronounce words and sentences so that we use as little articulatory effort while maintaining intelligibility. If a simple structure works just as well as a complex one, there is a natural tendency to adopt it, and therefore to simplify the articulatory movements in speech. The maximal simplification a segment can result in is its deletion. An example of this occurs in Received Pronunciation with the loss of the consonant /r/ in specific environments, a feature which is discussed in more detail in chapter 1.4.4 (Wells 1982: 94).

A further explanation follows from the fact that some segment types are simply more inherent to a speaker than others. For that reason they are learnt earlier by children and found more widely in languages all over the world. However, naturality is not necessarily the same thing as simplicity. For example, in popular London speech, where 'l-vocalisation', that is when the syllable-final /l/ is realised more as a vowel, has occurred the resultant pronunciation is usually rounded. This means that words such as *middle* are pronounced as [ˈmɪdʊ]. Although such roundness requires an additional articulatory movement it results in a more natural way of saying a word (Wells 1982: 94-97).

If ease of articulation was the only aim of a language, then all words could have the same, simple pronunciation. That is why the next reason for variety is that accents and language in general have one major purpose and that is to be intelligible. The innovations that might arise could result in the loss of certain contrasts and therefore produce misunderstandings.

If, for example, the phoneme [p] became voiced, there would be no certain way to distinguish between *park* and *bark*, except in written form. Despite this, some accents have developed in such a way that they tolerate these opportunities for confusion. On the other hand, it is understandable that other accents have failed to acquire various sound changes that lead to them (Wells 1982:99).

1.3 Factors Determining an Individual's Accent

As mentioned previously, every speaker has an accent and everyone's accent is, to some extent, unique to him or her as an individual. This means that every speaker of a particular accent has their own way of saying, which introduces yet another level of variation. This individual accent is a part of one's 'idiolect'; the linguistic system of an individual speaker or one's personal dialect (Crystal 2008: 235). There are several factors which influence a person's accent.

The first determinant, which is most important to this thesis, is geographical differentiation. One of the most obvious things we notice about a person's speech is that it gives us information about where they come from, where they grew up and, sometimes, where they now live. Accents can therefore be powerful indicators of one's geographical identity. Another reason why such determinant is considered to be important is that when speaking of accents, one's mind usually jumps to geographical distinctions, rather than further distinctions which will be described further. On a larger scale, accents allow us to determine whether a person is from Britain or North America, while on a much finer scale, it is possible to trace a person's accent to a part of a country or, in some cases, even a city (Wells 1982: 8-10).

There are also several physical factors which influence one's accent. Firstly, the age of the speaker has a notable effect on idiom, as voice is physically affected by the bodily changes which occur as the human body gets older. The most prominent change comes during childhood, however. Another physical factor is the speaker's gender. Listeners tend to distinguish between male and female speakers very precisely, and there are certain aspects of speech ascribed to women (tentativeness, wider pitch range) and men (slower tempo, smaller intonation range) that highlight the differences between female and male voices (Wells 1982: 21).

Another important determinant of accent is the socio-economic status of the speaker – their social status, as speech stratification correlates with the social one. In other words, a person's social position reflects not only which words they choose when speaking, but also the way they pronounce them. Simply put, the way a person speaks is closely correlated with the social group he is in and with the position of that group in the social hierarchy. This is true easily visible in Great Britain, where the conception of social classes has been reinforced throughout history by constitutional monarchy. The spoken accent has, therefore, become an indicator of one's membership in one or the other group. This separation is fading nowadays, but there are still accents that guarantee prestige for its speakers (Hughes, Trudgill and Watt 2012: 4). Interestingly, RP, which is widely regarded as the most prestigious British accent, is not bound to a certain region and is used throughout Britain.

1.4 Received Pronunciation (RP)

As mentioned previously, it is primarily in Great Britain that accents are considered to be a mark of socio-economic status. Received Pronunciation is a clear example, as it is considered to be on the top of the notional accent hierarchy. RP is an accent of English, which is normally taught at schools all over the world. There are a number of reasons why this particular accent is taught. The main one is that, even though the accent historically originated in the south-east of England, it is now a regionless accent within England. This means that when a person speaks with a perfect RP accent it is almost impossible to estimate, where the person originally comes from as it is possible to encounter it across the country. The other advantage of learning RP is that it – and accents similar to RP – is widely used in broadcasting. A learner of RP will therefore have plenty of opportunities to hear it when visiting Britain (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 14). All of these are strong reasons for keeping RP as the accent taught at schools throughout the Czech Republic and, with no other suitable candidate that might take its place, it will probably remain so. Besides that, it would probably be very difficult to institute a new accent to be taught at schools, as most modern books used in classrooms use RP as the basis for teaching pronunciation.

In spite of the widespread use of RP, there are some attributes of this accent that might make it disadvantageous to learn this particular accent. Trudgill introduces three main drawbacks in particular of teaching RP as the main accents at schools outside the United Kingdom. The first main drawback is the small number of native speakers, as the estimates show about 3–5 per cent of the English population speak RP as their native accent, which might become

a substantial obstacle for students. This means they might encounter difficulties when trying to understand the other 95–97 per cent of people who do not speak it. The second aspect of RP which might be considered a disadvantage is its perception among native speakers. This has to do with the fact that it is considered to be an accent with a high social status, associated mainly with the upper-middle and upper classes. It can, therefore, cause "unwanted, egregious reactions in some people" (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 14). Interestingly, only the social implications of learning RP have been considered by Trudgill and Hannah and they do not take the difficulty of learning the accent into consideration in any way. This might once again point to the fact that RP is regarded with high standards.

Despite its downsides, it is probable that RP will remain as the accent taught at many schools outside of the UK. One contender, which is also described in this thesis, might be the American accent, as it has, as will be observable in a later chapter, a great influence on today's students. Due to the heterogeneous accent environment in the USA however, it is unlikely that such accent would be both simple and appropriate to learn for the students. There are other British accents that might come into consideration, such as Cockney or the Scottish accent. These are, however heavily influenced by geography and might make it hard for the speaker to be understood outside of the geographical boundaries of these accents.

1.4.1 Variety within RP

Although RP is usually considered to be a single accent, there is nevertheless significant variability within it. Linguists differentiate three main types of variability in RP: systemic, realisational and lexical. Systemic or inventory variability occurs when different speakers have different sets of phonemes. In RP this difference occurs in the vowel inventory, as some, largely older, speakers have one more vowel phoneme than others. They distinguish between pairs of words like *paw* and *pore*, pronouncing them /pɔː/ and /pɔə/ respectively, while most younger speakers do not have the /ɔə/ vowel in their phonetic inventory and pronounce both words simply as /pɔː/ (Hughes, Trudgill, Watt 2012: 40). The realisational variability refers to how a single phoneme may have different phonetic realisations. For example, all RP speakers have a phoneme /əʊ/, which contrasts with /eɪ/, /aʊ/ and /aɪ/. Older speakers may pronounce the vowel as [oʊ], with a back first element, although it is now considered to be a very old-fashioned pronunciation and therefore rather rare. The vowel phoneme of most RP speakers has a more central origin, thus giving [bəʊt] (Hughes, Trudgill, Watt 2012; 40).

Lastly there is the lexical variability which, in the context of pronunciation, refers to the use of different series of phonemes for the same word. An example to illustrate this can be found in the different pronunciations of the word *economic*, while some RP speakers prefer to say /iːkəˈnɒmɪk/ others say /ekəˈnɒmɪk/ (Hughes, Trudgill, Watt 2012; 40).

1.4.1.1 Reasons for Variety

All the variabilities mentioned previously relate to individual words and to differences of pronunciation between individuals. There is also further variability in continuous speech, some of which depends on the speed and formality of speech as much as it does on the differences between the speakers. This formality includes several processes: H-dropping (e.g. /ˈstɒp ɪm/ for stop him), R-insertion (e.g. /vəˈnɪləɹ aɪs ˈkriːm/ for vanilla ice cream), elision (/ˈspek səʊ/ for *expect so*) and assimilation (/ðap ˈpleɪt/ for *that plate*) (Hughes, Trudgill, Watt 2012; 41).

There are several reasons for such discrepancies within RP. The primary reasons are: the age of the speaker (e.g. older speakers have one more vowel phoneme and younger speakers use more glottal stops), their social class (e.g. upper-class use more open final vowel in *university*) and when they acquired the accent as those who acquire RP after childhood tend to avoid 'normal' features of faster speech of the accent, such as the dropping of unaccented /h/ in pronouns. There are, however, secondary and more personal factors as well, such as what school the speaker has attended, their profession, personality or attitude towards language and other RP speakers etc. (Hughes, Trudgill, Watt 2012; 41)

Using these factors, linguists have divided RP into subvarieties, such as Gimson's *conservative*, *general* and *advanced RP*, Cruttenden's *general*, *refined* and *regional RP* and lastly Wells' *u-RP* (uppercrust or upperclass RP), *mainstream RP* and *adoptive RP*. The mainstream subvariety has been considered for the definition of the vowel and consonant systems of RP in this thesis as well as for the pronunciation features listed at the end. (Hughes, Trudgill, Watt 2012; 42)

1.4.2 Vowel System of RP

The standard RP vowel system is distributed as follows in figure (1):

checked   free

Figure 1 – The vowel system of RP (Wells 1982: 119)

Except for /ə/, which is restrained to weak (unstressed) syllables, there are nineteen vowels in the system. Of these, six are considered to be 'short' vowels /ɪ, e, æ, ʌ, ɒ, ʊ/ and, as Wells (1982) states, they are of short duration when compared with their 'long' counterparts in identical surroundings. This duration, however, varies significantly according to the phonetic environment, and so these short vowels have certain, quite long, allophones. The short vowels are – as opposed to long vowels and diphthongs – confounded by the phonotactic constraint and they cannot appear in a stressed monosyllable with no final consonant. Therefore, they are labelled as 'checked' (e.g. *kit* - /kɪt/, *vent* - /vent/, *cat* - /kæt/, *cup* - /kʌp/, *clock* - /klɒk/, and *put* - /pʊt/). But in *key* - /kiː/, *clay* - /kleɪ/, *near* - /nɪə/, etc. the vowel is free of any checking consonant, therefore such vowels and diphthong are labelled as 'free'. Free vowels also occur in front of a checking consonant, such as in *deep* /diːp/. The terms 'free' and 'checked' must be used only when relating to stressed syllables, as in RP, both /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ can occur with no following consonant in an unstressed syllable (e.g. *happy* - /ˈhæpɪ/ and *value* - /ˈvæljʊ/ (Wells 1982: 119).

The use of a specific vowel in certain words is usually illustrated so-called lexical sets which show their occurrence in the set of keywords. Each of these words stands for a greater number of words which behave in according to their representation in the set (words such as *bit* or *lid* would fall in the KIT set for example). The set for RP is shown below in figure (2):

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KIT	ɪ	FLEECE	iː	NEAR	ɪə
DRESS	e	FACE	eɪ	SQUARE	ɛə
TRAP	æ	PALM	ɑː	START	ɑː
LOT	ɒ	THOUGHT	ɔː	NORTH	ɔː
STRUT	ʌ	GOAT	əʊ	FORCE	ɔː
FOOT	ʊ	GOOSE	uː	CURE	ʊə
BATH	ɑː	PRICE	aɪ	*happ*ʏ	ɪ
CLOTH	ɒ	CHOICE	ɔɪ	*lett*ER	ə
NURSE	ɜː	MOUTH	aʊ	*comm*A	ə

Figure 2 – RP lexical set (Wells 1982: 120)

1.4.3 Consonant System

Accents of English do not differ significantly from one another in their consonant systems. The system for RP can be seen in figure 3. It consists of 24 consonant sounds. The most numerous group of consonants is that with alveolar realisation. They are also the most frequent, as they account for about 27% of RP phonemes frequency (Gimson & Cruttenden 1994: 196).

The only consonant that might be added is the /ʍ/ consonant. This consonant is, however, very rarely used in RP and can also be transcribed simply as /hw/.

	Bilabial		Labiodental		Dental		Alveolar		Post-alveolar		Palatal	Velar		Glottal
Plosive	p	b					t	d				k	g	
Affricate									tʃ	dʒ				
Nasal		m						n					ŋ	
Fricative			f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	ʒ				h
Approximant		(w)								r	j		w	
Lateral approximant								l						

Figure 3 – RP consonants (Roach 2009: 242)

1.4.4 Distinct Pronunciation Features of RP

There are several features which make it possible to differentiate RP from other accents of the English language. These features vary greatly and depend heavily on the age of the

speaker. Below is a list of the major, most significant ones. Firstly, the distinct vowel features will be described, while the consonant features will be described afterwards.

The distinction between /ɔə/ and /ɔː/ is now lost for many RP speakers, as well for a number of other English accents, as the diphthong /ɔə/ has become monophthongized. Recently however a rather new development occurred. Another diphthong, namely /ʊə/ is also merging into /ɔː/. This change has, at least for some speakers, affected some words, but not all as some remained the same. An example of this is *sure* and *poor*, as they are still pronounced as /ʃɔː/ and /pʊə/ respectively. This change is, as most recent changes in RP, affecting speakers mainly in generations, meaning that a younger generation may have more words which have undergone this change (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 19).

RP speakers have a strong tendency to pronounce several triphthongs as monophthongs. Therefore, words such as *tower* /taʊə/ are pronounced as /tɑː/. This process has been labelled as 'smoothing' and is considered to be a probable cause for the previous feature as well, whereby the centering diphthong becomes a monophthong (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 19).

Words such as *suit* can be pronounced either /suːt/ or /sjuːt/. The feature of losing the /j/ phoneme following certain initial consonants is known as 'yod-dropping'. It is a typical feature of Standard American English as is discussed later in chapter 1.5.3. The common trend is that middle-aged and younger speakers tend to exclude the /j/ after /s/ before /uː/, whereas older speakers include the consonant. This tendency is much more noticeable in other words such as: *super*, *Susan*, while not as perceptible in others – e.g. *suit*. When /j/ appears word-internally in RP, it tends to be kept in, as in *assume* /asjuːm/. There is also a variety after /l/. When it appears in a word in a word-initial position, it can either behave normally – e.g. lute /luːt/, or it can be pronounced with /j/ – e.g. *lute* /ljuːt/ and *illusion* /ɪljuːʒn/ (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 19).

When orthographic *o* occurs before the voiceless fricatives /f/, /θ/ or /s/, older speakers sometimes pronounce it as /ɔː/. For example *off* is pronounced as /ɔːf/. Such pronunciation is becoming rather rare to encounter however, as younger speakers replace /ɔː/ with /ɒ/. Some words may also be pronounced with /ɔː/, even though they bear no fricatives – e.g. *salt*, *fault*. But again, younger speakers often tend to pronounce them with /ɒ/ (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 19).

The RP accent has several consonant features which are found in other accents throughout England, but are not shared in American, Scottish or Irish English. This ensures that it is distinct from them. One such feature concerns the positional allophones of the consonant /l/. Syllable-initial /l/ as in lot is 'clear' which means it is pronounced with the body of the tongue raised towards the hard palate, which gives resonance to the front vowel. On the other hand, syllable-final /l/ as in *mill* and syllabic /l/ as in *bottle* are 'dark' or velarized, which means they are pronounced with the body of the tongue raised towards the soft palate, which gives out a back-vowel resonance. Therefore *lull* /lʌl/ is pronounced [lʌɫ] (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 19).

Most accents of English, except the Scottish, have lost the /ʍ/ × /w/ contrast. This means that they do not differentiate when pronouncing words such as *witch – which*, *Wales – whales*. There are, however, some – predominantly older RP speakers – who, usually consciously and intentionally, make the distinction and preserve this feature. Because of its pronunciation, this phoneme can either be marked as /ʍ/, or as /hw/, both of these are understood, while the second one is easier to recognize for some (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 19).

It is not uncommon for many varieties of English accents to forego the consonant /t/ and use a glottal stop instead [ʔ], except for when it is at the beginning of a stressed syllable (e.g. *bitter* – [ˈbɪtə / ˈbɪʔə]). In RP, the glottal stop occurs only under two circumstances. Firstly – and this is a rather new innovation in the accent and is thus used mostly by younger speakers – as a realization of syllable-final /t/ before a following consonant. This means that for example *fit them* has two possible pronunciations [fɪtðəm / fɪʔðəm]. The second instance is when [ʔ] occurs before /tʃ/ and in certain other consonant clusters, as in *simply* [sɪmʔplɪ], where its usage is known as 'glottal reinforcement' or 'glottalization' (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 19).

English accents are usually divided based on the /r/ pronunciation. Some English accents are 'rhotic', while some are 'non-rhotic'. Rhotic accents are the accents which actually pronounce the /r/ consonant, symbolized by the orthographic *r*, in words such as *far* or *farm* /fɑːr/, fɑːrm/. In these cases, where the consonant is put before a pause or a consonant, it is known as 'non-prevocalic /r/'. The speakers of rhotic accents therefore

differentiate in pronunciation of the words such as *cawed and cord*. Examples of rhotic accents can be found throughout south-western England or in Lancashire. Non-rhotic accents, on the other hand, do not pronounce /r/ in these positions. Instead, they pronounce the examples as /fɑː/, fɑːm/. RP, as well as other southern and eastern accents, is non-rhotic and therefore doesn't pronounce /r/ unless it occurs word-internally, such as in *drawing* or under other conditions (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 19).

Though the speakers of non-rhotic accents do not pronounce the orthographic /r/ when it is in front of a pause or a consonant, most of them however, with RP included, pronounce it when there is a following word which begins with a vowel: *It's not far* (no /r/), *He's far behind* (no /r/), but *She's far away* (/r/ pronounced). This means that words such as *far* have two ways of pronunciations and they depend on whether or not there is a following vowel. In non-rhotic accents, such /r/ is known as *linking /r/* (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 19).

Due to the development of the English language, there are now many examples of English accents in which /r/ is inserted before a following vowel, even though there is no *r* in its spelling. Such /r/ is known as *intrusive /r/*. In majority of cases, it occurs as follows: *idea* /aɪˈdɪə/ - *idea and* /aidɪərənd/. It is important to note however that, as Wells (1984) states, both *linking* and *intrusive /r/* are historically orthographically dependent when speaking of RP (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 19).

1.5 American Accent

North America is vast not only with regards to its size but also to the number of English speaking people and subsequently in the variety of the English language within it. According to the 2015 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, around 283 million people speak a variety of English as their first or second language. Broadly speaking, they would clearly have what is popularly known as 'an American accent', yet their accents are by no means uniform. The Atlantic coast, where the first European settlers first landed and colonised America sees the sharpest differences between individual accents. The reason for that is that the eastern coast is a geographical area, from which the modern-day USA had been settled by European colonizers, which then evolved into the original thirteen colonies. These then later created their own independent country. The inland areas were then colonized from the east. This can be seen by the fact that the boundaries of certain linguistic features (termed 'isoglosses') tend to appear horizontally from east to west, which can be

seen in figure (4). These principal areas (or as they are sometimes called – bands) span horizontally across the country. The variations in pronunciation are most distinguishable in the east but as we move more to the west they get increasingly confused and intermingled due to the erratic movement of people who historically bore their accent from the east (Wells 1982: 469).

Figure 4 – Dialect areas of the United States (Wells 1984: 468)

Despite the vast variety in American accents, we can find several attempts to unite and to name a single one 'basic' accent. One such example is the so-called 'General American accent' (further GenAm), encompassing the majority of American accents without showing any marked eastern or southern characteristics and thus make it a neutral accent. GenAm term can also be used to standardize American English. Obviously, it is not a single, exactly defined accent but rather a concept which refers to non-eastern and non-southern accents, therefore excluding the sharpest features of speech of those accents. It corresponds to a layperson's perception of an American accent without any regional characteristics and is sometimes referred to as 'Network English', as it is the variety that is most accepted in television networks across the entire United States of America (Wells 1982: 469).

There are some disputes over the term, however. According to Kretzchmar's argumentation, there is no real historical or present-day justification for the term 'General American'. He exclaims that it is more of an attempt to create or to name a "perfect and exemplary state of American English" and insist it does not represent the condition of American English, as it implies that there is some exemplary type of American English, from which other varieties deviate, which then can imply privileging and prejudice. The proposed and usually preferred

alternative comes in the term 'Standard American English'. This term is described as more of a level of quality that is used by educated speakers in a formal setting and varies not only from region to region but also from person to person, and is characterized as what is left over when a speaker suppresses their regional and social features that might become noticeable. Some speakers are better at suppressing their regional accent, while some listeners are less able to detect local and non-local features (Schneider, Kortmann 2014: 257-263). Even though the term is disputable, the basic idea of naming one accent which could portray the main characteristics of American variety remains and it is therefore safe to assume that the term can be used interchangeably.

1.5.1 Vowel System

Wells sets out GenAm vowel system as follows in figure (5):

ɪ		ʊ	i				u			
ɛ		ʌ	eɪ		ɔɪ			o	ɜ		ɔ
æ				aɪ		aʊ			ɑ	

checked	free		

Figure 5 – GenAm vowel system (Wells 1982: 120)

As is evident from the table above, there are fifteen vowels in the inventory of General American. There is also [ə] and [ɚ], but these are once again restricted only to weak syllables. Vowel length is not as important in GenAm as it is in other accents, as their length depends mainly on their phonetic surroundings. Despite this, it is still possible to distinguish between 'checked' and 'free' vowels, which operate on the same basis as they have in RP, see section 1.4.2. This means that 'checked' vowels are prohibited from appearing in a stressed monosyllable with no final consonant.

Wells also specifies, that the mid and close free vowels can either be monophthongal [i, e, u, o] or diphthongal [ɪi, eɪ, ʊu, oʊ] and that both possibilities of transcription are acceptable as the basis for the phonemic symbol. Checked vowels are often diphthongal as well. Especially if they occur before a liquid consonant, such as *hill* /hɪəɫ/ – /hɪl/ or *here* /hɪəɹ/ – /hɪr/. Although it is undoubtedly simpler to write words with single-letter symbols, this thesis

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will write them in the two-syllable version, in order to not create confusion with the RP transcription.

Another problem arises when speaking of grouping phonemes in the vowel symbolized as /ɜ/ and is connected with the rhoticity of GenAm. This vowel occurs in words such as *nurse* /nɜːrs/, or *sermon* /ˈsɜrmən/ and it is always followed by /r/. Many dictionaries and courses unify /ɜr/ into a single symbol, namely /ɝ/, thus changing the transcription into /nɝs/ and /ˈsɝmən/. Similar condition arises when speaking of /ər/, which in turn is transcribed as /ɚ/. Therefore, as an example, the word *further* can be transcribed as either /ˈfɜrðər/ or /ˈfɝðɚ/ (Wells 1982: 121).

The lexical set for GenAm looks as follows in figure (6):

KIT	ɪ	FLEECE	i	NEAR	ɪr
DRESS	ɛ	FACE	eɪ	SQUARE	ɛr
TRAP	æ	PALM	ɑ	START	ɑr
LOT	ɒ	THOUGHT	ɔ	NORTH	ɔr
STRUT	ʌ	GOAT	o	FORCE	or
FOOT	ʊ	GOOSE	u	CURE	ʊr
BATH	æ	PRICE	aɪ	*happ*Y	ɪ
CLOTH	ɔ	CHOICE	ɔɪ	*lett*ER	ɚ
NURSE	ɝ	MOUTH	aʊ	*comm*A	ə

Figure 6 – Lexical sets for GenAm (Wells 1982: 121-122)

1.5.2 Consonant System

As Wells mentions, there are no significant differences between the consonant systems of General American and Received Pronunciation and he considers them to be identical. Therefore, both systems can be set out in the way, which can be seen in 1.4.3. The only exception in these systems would be RP's /ʍ/, but this consonant, as it has been mentioned previously, is rather rare.

1.5.3 Distinct Pronunciation Features of GenAm

Lastly, it is necessary to mention the features of American speech that are easily distinguishable for listeners. These will be mainly compared with previously described RP and will mention both vowel and consonant differences.

The most notable difference, which has been pointed to above, is that General American is rhotic, whereas RP is not. This means that the consonant /r/ is pronounced in all positions and is perhaps the most striking difference between the two accents for all listeners. This means that words with no /r/ pronunciation in RP, such as *car* (/kɑː/), are pronounced with /r/ in GenAm (/kɑːr/). (Collins & Mees 2003: 304)

In GenAm, the vowel found in TRAP is closer and lengthened, making it sound more as the vowel found in RP's SQUARE. This also occurs in BATH words, where RP has /ɑː/ as in PALM, which might also be considered as one of the giveaway signs of an American accent to listeners. (Collins & Mees 2003: 305)

The /ʌ/ vowel is generally closer, making it sound more like RP's /ə/ when it comes before /r/. In addition, in most words where /ʌ/ appears in RP, General American uses /ɜː/, thus changing the pronunciation of *worry* from /ˈwʌri/ to /ˈwɜːri/. (Collins & Mees 2003: 305)

As one can see from the American lexical set (5) the vowel in words such as *lot*, or *pot*, is an unrounded [ɑ] rather than RP's rounded [ɒ], which we can see in its lexical set for the corresponding word. Wells refers to such development as 'LOT unrounding'. A great example of this phenomenon is the fact that in GenAm, the words *bother* and *father* rhyme, whereas in RP they do not (/ˈbɑðɚ/ and /ˈfɑðɚ/ × /ˈbɒðə/ and /ˈfɑːðə/). (Wells 1982: 246)

The vowel /ɔ/ which can be found in words such as *paw* in GenAm tends to be shorter than its /ɔː/ variant found in RP. Aside from that it tends to be more open and less rounded as well, thus further dividing pronunciation of words such as *horse* (RP: /hɔːs/ - GenAm: /hɔrs/). (Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 46)

Whereas RP and similar accents tend to pronounce words such as *tune*, *duke*, or *new* with /j/, General American and its speakers have foregone the consonant in environments

historically pronounced as /ju/, specifically after consonants /t/, /d/, /n/, /s/, /z/, /l/, /θ/. Here, GenAm predominantly has only /u/. Wells also mentions that, because the accent is not uniform, not every speaker of General American will speak in such a way, as some easterners and southerners pronounce these words with either /ju/ or the diphthong /ɪu/. This rule applies mainly to strong syllables, because in the case of weak syllables, the complete elimination is less widespread. This means that for example *assume* is pronounced as /əˈsjuːm/ in RP but as /əˈsuːm/ in GenAm (Wells 1982: 247).

The next feature is mentioned by Wells to be "…one of the most striking characteristics of American pronunciation to the ears of a non-American…" and it is the intervocalic consonant in words such as *atom*, *latter* or *better*. The reason for that is that what is pronounced as /t/ in RP is usually a vocalic flap and sounds closer to [d], which is usually transcribed as /t̬/, although there is further debate on the topic of how exactly this consonant should be transcribed. The result is that words such as *latter* and *ladder* are homophones in General American and are both pronounced as /ˈlæt̬.ɚ/ (Wells 1982: 248-249).

The pronunciation of the consonant /l/ is rather dark in all positions of GenAm, therefore there is no differentiation between [l] and [ɫ], which we can find in RP. The American way of saying /l/ can appear as /w/ to a British speaker, therefore making *life* sound like *wife* (Collins & Mees 2003: 307).

As is obvious when comparing these features with those of RP, which can be found in chapter 1.4.4, there are many differences between the two observed accents. Not all differences are equal so to speak, as some should be easy to perceive for a listener, such as the rhoticity of each accent or the way they pronounce the /t/ consonant, while other, such as the pronunciation of words similar to TRAP. Even though these differences exist, the accents share many more similarities, as they still are varieties of one original language. For this reason, it might not be an easy task for a listener to determine which accent they hear. On this, the premise of the subsequent research is based.

2 PRACTICAL SECTION

The practical section comprises the actual research done for the thesis. Here, the questionnaire and the test are described. The former was used to determine which accents should be tested, while the latter analyses how well the students are able to recognise them. The individual assumptions for each experiment are also introduced. Lastly, the results of both examinations are presented and commented on.

2.1 Research

From my experience as a student and as a lector at a language school, I can say that accent education is almost non-existent in the English education curriculum in Czech schools. That is not to say that students are not taught how to pronounce certain words correctly, but that they are not taught the specific differences between accents which they are exposed to on a regular basis, thus it might be hard for them to recognise said accents when they encounter them. For example, the books I use when teaching include several speakers. Some of them are from a country, where English is not the official language, such as Spain or France, while some are from English-speaking countries. In case of these native speakers however, it is almost never disclosed where they are from and therefore which accent they are speaking, except for when they specifically mention where they are from.

The particular aim of my research was twofold. Firstly, I needed to find and describe the differences between two major accents: Received Pronunciation and the General American accent. These would then be used to conduct a test to see to what extent are students of the first year at the Technical University of Liberec (further TUL) able to distinguish between said major accents of English without any formal training in accent recognition and to see what features of these accents are most noticeable for the students and which would cause them problems.

2.2 Aims of the Analysis

Besides the overarching aim mentioned in the previous paragraph, this thesis aims to find out which native accents of the English language could be considered as major. That is which accents do the students of a certain level of English (at least a B2 level, according to Common European Framework of Reference) hear the most in their everyday lives, either in popular media or in person.

To answer these questions a questionnaire and a test were constructed. The questionnaire tackled the first aim, as it is supposed to discover what accents the students are exposed to exactly and through what media. After receiving the results of the questionnaire, a test was conducted, in which the discriminatory skills of the students were tested and subsequently evaluated. In it, the students were presented with different pronunciations of words or sentences and they were supposed to decide whether what they heard or saw transcribed was in an American or British accent.

2.3 Assumptions of the Research

The questionnaire attempted to show what accents the students encounter in their lives when they listen to the English language. The assumption for it was that England and the USA would take precedent here, as modern English media is dominated by these two countries (the USA more so than England) as opposed to countries such as Australia or Canada, which do not account for such a large percentage of media as the two countries. The same applies for real-life exposure to the language. Here, it was assumed that England would be mentioned the most, as it is a prominent destination for students.

The test was expected to show the students' ability to determine, which accent they were hearing or reading at a given time. These accents were shown to them both individually, in single words, and in sentences. The words and sentences in the test were transcribed and pronounced in a variation of either a British or an American accent. There is one exception to this, however, as in one question of the test a sentence narrated by a Scottish native was used to see if the students were able to pick out an accent that is different from the two tested ones. Given the fact that, at the time of the research, students at TUL and Czech students in general are not usually taught the precise differences between the two accents, it was reasonable to suppose they would not be able to differentiate between them with a great deal of accuracy. However, since the Scottish speaker manifests features which are not a part of neither of these accents, it was expected the students would notice it and not include it in their answer. It was also assumed that some lesser known features, such as /ju/ dropping in the American accent, would be a major hurdle for students as opposed to the more obvious ones, such as the rhoticity of these accents.

2.4 Methods of Data Collection

As stated previously, two methods of collecting data were carried out for the purposes of the research, namely an online questionnaire and an online test. The questionnaire concerned only the students' preferences and hobbies, whereas the test aimed to analyse their individual skills when asked to discriminate between two English accents.

2.4.1 The Questionnaire

Firstly, a questionnaire was conducted to see what accents of the English language the students are exposed to. For the purposes of this research, the LI2BE: Phonetics and Phonology Summer Semester 2019/2020 (further LI2BE) course for first year undergraduates was selected. The reasoning behind this decision is that these students had better knowledge of English transcription and their overall English skills should be at a higher level than they were in the course one semester prior. Furthermore, they were acquainted with the International Phonetic Alphabet (further IPA), which was used heavily in the test and its knowledge was therefore crucial for the results to be concrete.

The questionnaire was created in Google Documents and then posted on the LI2BE forum. It comprised ten questions, which were structured so that the respondents were asked about several factors that could influence their abilities to recognise English accents and show which ones they were regularly exposed to. These aspects ranged from English speaking countries they have visited to prominent media in their everyday lives, which they might be exposed to in English, such as film, internet videos, or TV series, while also including videogames and music.

2.4.1.1 The Questionnaire Questions

The very first question simply aimed to find out if the respondents were male or female. This was done moreso out of personal curiosity, rather than for any particular reason.

The second and third question closely correspond with each other. The former simply asks students whether or not they have ever been to an English-speaking country. To this, the students responded either Yes or No. The latter question then proceeds to ask the students which English speaking countries they have visited in particular. To answer, the respondents were supposed to name the countries.

Figure 7 – Questions 2 and 3 of the questionnaire

The fourth question aimed to find out to what extent these students were exposed to English in films. Here, a scale answer was selected, where the students were supposed to choose between the numbers from 1 to 10. On it, 1 meant that they only watch English movies with a voiceover in their mother tongue and 10 stood for only watching English movies in English – either with or without subtitles. The reason why 1–10 was selected is that it closely corresponds to percentages and the students can therefore express their choice to a better degree than if the scale was comprised of digits 1–5, for example.
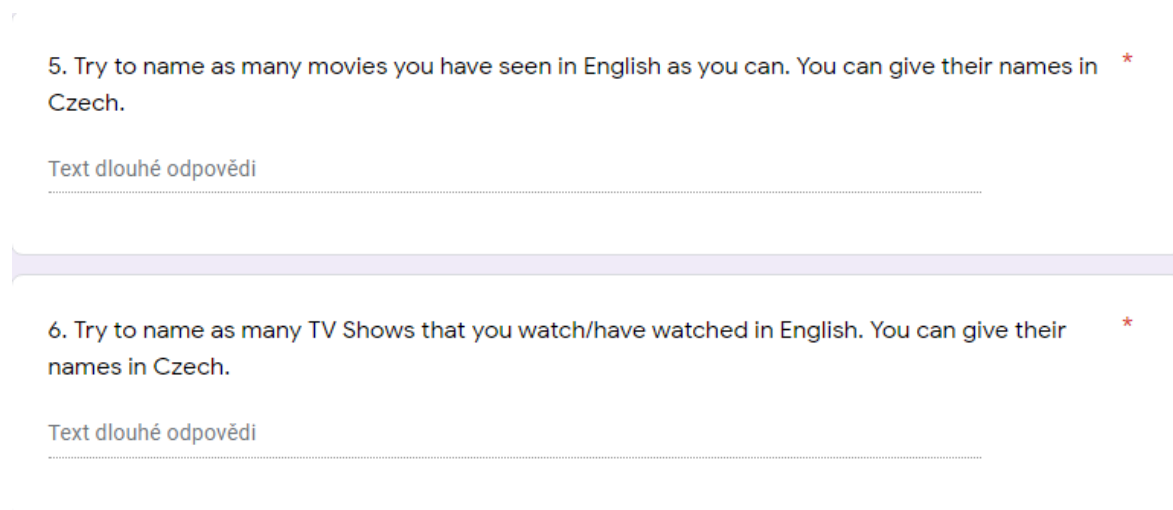
Figure 8 – Question 4

The fifth question corresponds closely with the previous one, as it was included to see what accents have the students been exposed to in films exactly, as the students were asked to give examples of movies they saw in English as of late. Here, the native accent of the main cast has been taken as a main factor to determine the country of origin for the movie. This is because, as mentioned in chapter 1.3, individual accent of a person is heavily influenced by where they are from or where they were brought up. Thus, if a movie or its franchise has a

predominantly American cast, it is considered as American for the purposes of the questionnaire and the research. By this merit however, some movies will also be considered as 'mixed' as they have near equal amount of actors from both countries. A prime example of such is the *Lord of The Rings* franchise (2001–2003), in which both American and British actors appear, alongside New Zealanders.

Question 6 also followed a similar topic, but this time, the respondents were asked about TV series they had seen in English. The answers were, similarly to the question regarding movies, divided by the country of origin of the main actors in the movies. There are some exceptions, however. For example, in *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) some actors are American, but can be heard using a British accent. A great example is Peter Dinklage who in the series portrays a nobleman. Even though the actor was born in New Jersey, USA, in the show his character speaks with an accent that closely resembles RP. This might be due to the fact that RP and similar accents are perceived to correspond to a higher social status, especially in monarchical society, as mentioned in chapter 1.4.

5. Try to name as many movies you have seen in English as you can. You can give their names in   *
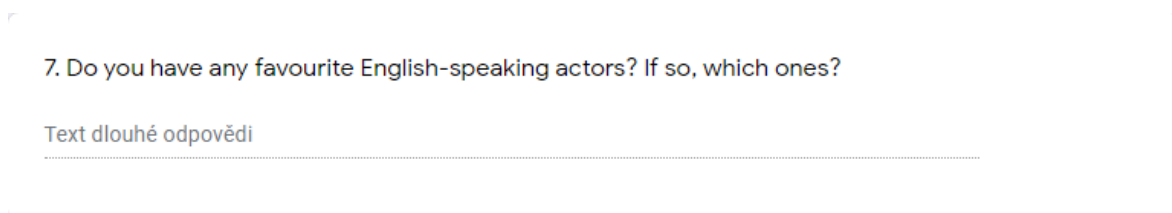Czech.

Text dlouhé odpovědi

6. Try to name as many TV Shows that you watch/have watched in English. You can give their   *
names in Czech.

Text dlouhé odpovědi

Figure 9 – Questions 5 and 6 of the questionnaire

For Question 7, the aim was to discover what actors the respondents prefer and therefore to see what movies they watch outside of the movies mentioned previously. Here, the actor's country of origin, and therefore their native accent is taken into consideration. An exception would be when an actor was born in one country, but raised in another one, thus gaining a different accent. Even though some actors have played a role, where their accent is altered, their native accent is usually prevalent in the majority of movies they play in. This means

that when the students saw them, there is a high probability they had their native accent. For example, Hugh Laurie is British, yet he takes on the role of Doctor House, who speaks with an American accent. Outside of this role, however, he uses his native, RP accent.
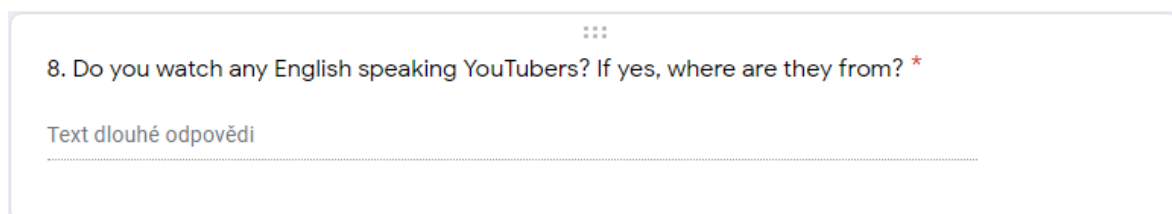
7. Do you have any favourite English-speaking actors? If so, which ones?

Text dlouhé odpovědi

Figure 10 – Question 7

Question 8 concerned a modern popular media and that is YouTube. The platform was chosen as it is becoming increasingly widespread amongst younger audiences, which the students most certainly are. Here, the respondents were asked to name the countries where their favourite English speaking YouTubers are from. This is to see what accents the students are most frequently exposed to, perhaps even more than they are from movies or other media.
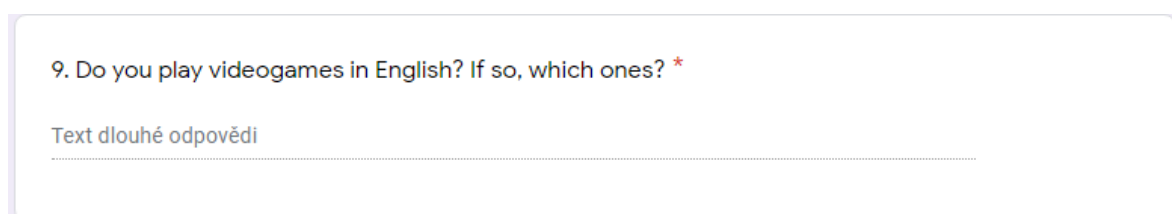
8. Do you watch any English speaking YouTubers? If yes, where are they from? *

Text dlouhé odpovědi

Figure 11 – Question 8

In the penultimate question, the respondents were asked about what games they play, or have recently played. Once again, the intent was to see what accents occur in these videogames, so that it would be possible to state that they have been exposed to a specific accent. However, most of the videogames that were mentioned have no specific accent. Instead an overwhelming majority of them have either vague foreign accents, or the characters do not speak English at all.
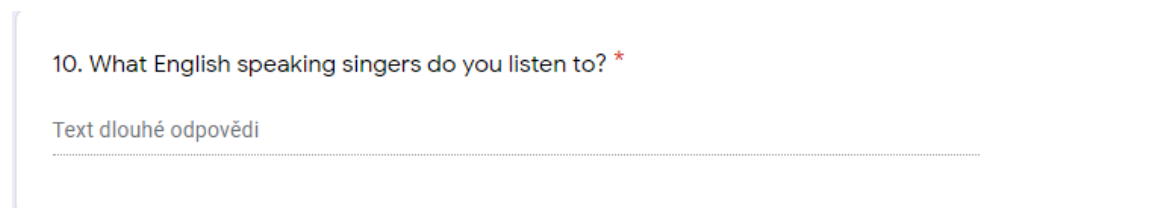
9. Do you play videogames in English? If so, which ones? *

Text dlouhé odpovědi

Figure 12 – Question 9

In the final question the students were asked what English speaking interprets they listen to. Hence, another crucial medium would be taken into consideration in addition to films, videogames and the Internet. The singer's or band's country of origin was once again the main determinant for this questionnaire, as most interprets usually sing in their native accents.

10. What English speaking singers do you listen to? *

Text dlouhé odpovědi

Figure 13 – The last question of the questionnaire

2.4.2 The Test

The main part of the research was a test called "Differentiating between accents". After finding out what accents of English could be considered as major in terms of exposure to the students, it was necessary for this thesis to find out how well the students could differentiate between them. For that purpose, a test featuring prominent differences in pronunciation between the accents was conducted. The same course was selected for it as for the questionnaire – that is the LI2BE course. The e-learning course has been used to create the quiz and to then run it for the students to see and try out. The test was opened for the students on the 28th April 2020 and closed at midnight on the 3rd May. Participation in the test was optional yet highly encouraged and overall, 42 people have attempted it.

The test was conducted online on the course page, instead of in the classroom, for several reasons. The main one when deciding which approach to select was that it provides a platform where videos and recordings can be played, which adds a second dimension to the test besides the transcriptions which have been selected.

Previously, the test was planned to be conducted in a class to eliminate the factor of cooperation as much as possible. However, due to the global events that occurred at the time of writing this thesis, namely the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, this was not possible as students were ordered to stay at home and the test had to be conducted online on the e-learning course. Due to these circumstances it is possible that some students received aid

from others, which would result in the results of the test being misrepresented. However, since the test was not mandatory and the results seem to be within reasonable margin, it is highly probable that did not happen.

The test consisted of six questions and each counted for 1.67 points out of 10 possible. They were all formulated on the basis of the distinct pronunciation features which were described in the theoretical part in the respective accents' chapters (1.4.4 for RP and 1.5.3 for the General American accent). Most questions relied on the fact that the students of the course should know the IPA, which is used when transcribing the English language, and would therefore be able to read the pronunciation transcribed in the questions. The prompts consisted mostly of single-word transcriptions. However, two questions concerned the spoken word as well. In one question a short clip from a British YouTuber reviewing an American film was used. In a later one a series of narrations of a selected sentence were listed, while the students were asked to choose which ones were read with an American accent.

In previous chapters, where the American accent was concerned, the vowels /ə/ and /ɜ/ followed by the consonant /r/ were transcribed with their own special symbol that is /ɚ/ and /ɝ/. Since it is probable that students have never seen these symbols before, I had decided to opt for a simplified yet not inaccurate transcription, which would be more obvious to the reader. This in turn ensured that they would pronounce them more accurately to themselves. Ultimately, in the test these vowels are transcribed as /ər/ and /ɜr/ respectively.

It is also important to note that every question had an 'I don't know' option. This was done in order for the results to be as accurate as possible. The students were asked to select this answer when they were unsure which option is the right one. The option was used several times by a handful of respondents, as will be evident from the results and the overall evaluation, later.

2.4.2.1 The test Questions

The first question in the test aimed to see if the students can determine which written transcription of the word *teacher* represents in the Standard American accent. This meant that the students were tested to assess if they could understand which accent was rhotic and which one is not. Three options were presented. The first one was a transcription of the word

which corresponded with the British accent - /ˈtiːtʃə/ and was therefore incorrect. The fact that it is a British accent is evident from the lack of pronounced /r/ at the end of the word. Second option was the correct one, as it was a transcription corresponding with StAmE - /ˈtiːtʃər/. Lastly, the students were able to select the 'I don't know' answer.

The second question included a one-minute part of video of a British YouTuber Nick Hodges, who calls his channel *History Buffs*. In it, he reviews the historical accuracy of the 1995 film *Casino*. The video was selected because Nick Hodges has a clear, near-RP accent, which should be easily distinguishable to the trained ear. This is because he does not pronounce the /r/ consonant in words such as *party* or *desert*, uses the /ɒ/ vowel instead of /ɑ/ in words such as *bomb* or *dollar* or pronounces the word *city* with a distinct /t/ consonant among other features typical for RP and other British accents. The students were asked to watch the clip and select whether the narrator is speaking in a British or a Standard American accent. For this question, one additional option had been included for the students to choose from and that was the 'He has a different accent' in case they felt that way.

The next question was set up to test if the students can correctly determine which transcription of the word *assume* is in RP and was therefore centered around the pronunciation of /j/ in words such as *tune* or *duke* (see pages 23 and 29). Here, two options were available. One was the transcription /əˈsjuːm/, which was correct as it represents the pronunciation of that word in RP. The second was /əˈsuːm/ which corresponded with the American pronunciation and was therefore incorrect.

The penultimate question followed the same format as the previous one, except here the students were asked to select transcriptions corresponding with the British accent. The transcriptions were once again presented with their corresponding words next to them. The correct answers were /fɑː/ and /djuːk/ because these correspond with the British pronunciation of the words *far* and *duke* as is evident from the missing consonant /r/ in *far* and the consonant /j/ in *duke*. The incorrect answers were /kɔːrd/, /ˈbɑːðər/ and /sɑlt/ which were transcriptions of the words *cord*, *bother* and *salt* corresponding with the American accent. The features giving it away were the pronunciation of the /r/ consonant in the first two words, vowel /ɑː/ instead of /ɒ/ in the last two words. The students had been provided with options 'I don't know' and 'None of the above'.

The final question of the test was comprised of six audio clips in which English speakers read the same sentence. These recordings were taken from *The speech accent archive* and include three American speakers, two British speakers and one Scottish speaker, which was added to further bring up the differences between the first two accents and to see, if they consider it as one of the two. The students were asked to listen to all six recordings and decide which of these speakers are American. They were not asked about the General American or the Standard American accent, because the speakers were from different parts of the United States of America and therefore did not have an exact GenAm accent. The sentence in the recording went as follows: "*Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: Six spoons of fresh snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station.*" Here, nearly all the aforementioned features, such as the speakers' rhoticity or the different pronunciations of words *bag* or *ask*, were prominent, as the sentence chosen is structured in such a way that the features of many English accents become apparent.

2.4.3 Evaluating the Data

Since both the questionnaire and the test were online, it was easier to evaluate them than if they were on paper. This is because the questionnaire concerned several open questions, where the respondents were, for example, asked to name as many TV series as possible, which they had seen in English. Had this been done in paper, it would be nigh impossible for me to count the actual amount of answers and to evaluate the percentages needed for the purposes of the research. The test concerned only closed answers however, yet the online environment made it much more organized, as I could see how well the students fared on each question individually.

2.4.4 Analysis of the results

Firstly, the questionnaire was analysed. It gathered responses from 59 respondents, though some have decided to not answer every question. To analyse the results I converted them into an Excel file, where I could count the individual responses and see the ratio of the accents which the students mentioned. The questionnaire itself was completely anonymous and I had no way of finding out who submitted which attempt.

This was not the case for the test however, where I could see individual names for specific results. However, as I do not know the students personally nor is their identity necessary for the purposes of the research, I decided to treat it as an anonymous test. Over the several days it was accessible, the test gathered fourty-two attempts, which were then analysed on the e-learning page. Here, the average marks were visible and it was possible to see everyone's response for each question. I could therefore see which questions caused problems to the students but also which questions posed less of a challenge for them.

2.4.4.1 Results of the Questionnaire

The first question received all 59 responses. The majority of students stated they were female, as only 37.3% said they are male. Their gender was not the main focus of the research, however, it would be interesting to explore the gender differences in perception of accent.

Out of the 59 total responses for question 2, a striking majority of 44 (76.3%) responded in the affirmative, meaning that they have visited an English speaking country before, and only 15 (23.7%) have not.

Unfortunately, for reasons unknown to me, question 3 received a total of only 32 responses, even though there were 59 responses to the previous two questions. Of those, 26 (81%) mentioned the UK as the country they have visited. Following that, only 2 students (6%) stated they have visited the USA and the same number responded that they visited both. One student (3%) responded with a different English speaking country, namely Ireland, and another named Hungary, even though English is not the native tongue there, nor is it the official language of Hungary.

Question 4 is the only one that uses a scale for the students to answer. In it, 10 means that every English movie they watch is in its original form, without any voiceover. An overwhelming majority of nearly 95% have marked their preference with an answer of larger than 5, which could be interpreted in the sense that more than half of all the movies they have seen in a recent period were in English. The exact results are observable in graph (1):
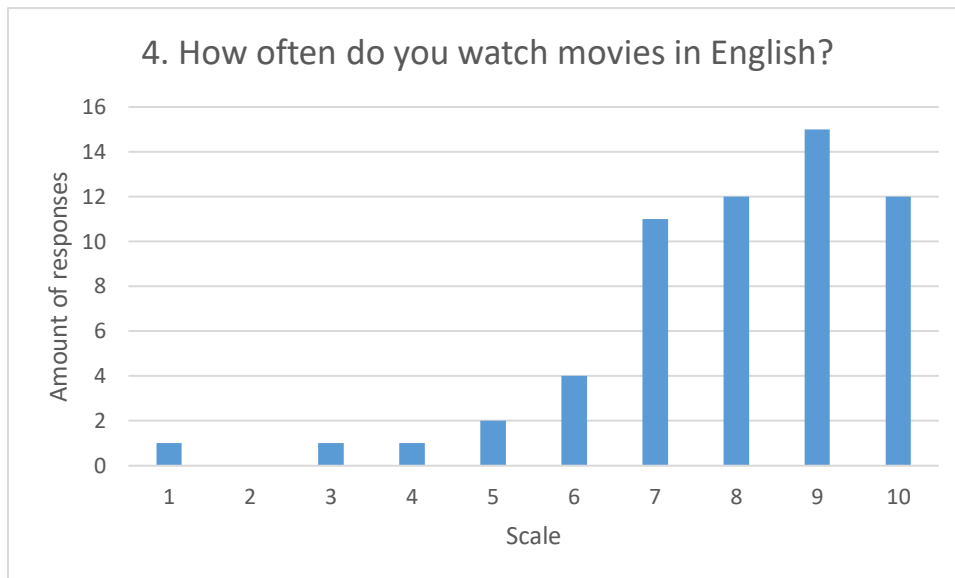
4. How often do you watch movies in English?

Figure 14 – Answers for question 4

Question 5 gathered responses from all 59 students and the results are as follows. 39 people (66%) have stated that they have lately seen both American and British films. Following that, 13 people (22%) stated only American films, while only 4 respondents (7%) mentioned only British features. The remaining 3 responses (5%) stated vague answers or mentioned no movies at all, thus making impossible to move them in any category.

The results of the sixth question followed a similar trend as in question five. This question gathered 58 responses meaning only one person did not express themselves. Most answers (64%) given by the respondents mentioned both American and British TV series. Then, second largest group of respondents (28%) mentioned only American TV shows, while the smallest group (3%) answered with British ones only. Surprisingly, more people (5%) have chosen to give an answer that could not be counted for the purpose of the thesis (e.g. 'Too many').

The results for question 7 were as follows. The question gathered a total of 51 worded responses. The fact that some students decided not to respond to this question could be attributed to the fact that not every respondent might have a favourite actor from an English speaking country, or they don't have preferences in actors at all. The total number of actors mentioned was 75. Of those, 39 were American, 30 were British and 4 were of a different origin (e.g. Irish or Australian). Of all the respondents, 35% mentioned both American and British actors as their favourite ones. After that 25% mentioned exclusively American and

18% mentioned only British actors. Only 8% of all respondents specifically named actors who were not born in the USA or the UK and 14% mentioned no preferred actors at all. Finally, 8 people have left the question unanswered.

The results for question 8 were once again rather decisive as two countries have taken precedence over others, as only two countries were mentioned in 54% of all responses. Mostly, students named a combination of both the United States of America and the United Kingdom, specifically 29%. Second after that came responses mentioning only YouTubers from the USA, which allotted 17% of the responses in total. Responses mentioning only the United Kingdom as the country of origin of their most watched YouTubers concerned 8% of the total votes and no other English speaking country was mentioned on its own, except for Australia. The same result of 8% achieved one other category and that is when correspondents mentioned non-English speaking countries. Here, Sweden was most prevalent, as one of the most popular English speaking YouTubers is from Sweden. Even though he lives in Brighton and speaks only English on his channel he cannot be considered to have a native English accent. Other than that, 14% of all respondents mentioned that they do not have any preferred YouTubers that came to mind or that they only browse the site for random videos. Unfortunately, 24% of all the respondents have decided not to answer this question, either for the already mentioned reason, that is that they do not have any preferences in this matter, or that they do not watch YouTube at all, but without them explicitly saying, it is impossible to know for certain.

Overall, the ninth question still received 39 responses, but due to the problem mentioned in the previous chapter, the results do not help the aim of the questionnaire in any way.

The last question gathered 56 responses and its results followed a similar direction as the previous ones. In total, 138 individual singers or bands were mentioned. Most of these, that is 102 (70%), were American. Then, 33 (23%) were British. Only 7 times have the students mentioned someone who is not from these two countries, which accounts for 5% of all the artists mentioned. Just as in previous questions, most responses mentioned more than one interpret and it was not uncommon to see more than one country of origin in one response. This translated to the fact that the biggest part of all responses (41%) mentioned both US and British artists, while only 39% and 14% mentioned American or British ones

respectively. Only 14% of respondents chose to name a band or a singer that is not from these two countries and the remaining 1% gave vague answers with no specific names.

The results of the questionnaire indicate to the fact that there are two main accents that influence the students when they are exposed to the English language. Those are the British and the American accent. Students' answers show that they are exposed to the American accent mostly through media such as films, TV shows or music. On the other hand, when real-life exposure is concerned, the British variety takes precedent, as the majority of students reported they have visited the United Kingdom. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that they must have spoken to a person with a British accent.

2.4.4.2 Results of the Test

The results for the first question were as follows: 33 students selected the correct option, which means that this question had a 79% success rate. Of the rest, seven have incorrectly chosen the transcription corresponding with the British accent and only two students have selected the 'I don't know' option. The average point result for the question was 1.31, which was the best average out of all of them, making this the easiest question of the test for the students, thus reinforcing the assumption that rhoticity is one of the more obvious and recognisable features of these accents for the students.

Chart 1 – Results of Question 1

Correct	33	79%
Incorrect	7	17%
I don't know	2	5%
Total	42	100%

After the test had ended, the second question gathered 25 correct responses, which translates to a 60% success rate. Of the 17 incorrect responses, 12 selected the option for an American accent, one chose the 'I don't know' option and, surprisingly, four stated that he spoke with a different accent than a British or an American one. The average point yield for this question was 0.99.

Chart 2 – Results of Question 2

Correct	25	60%
Incorrect	12	29%
Other	4	10%
I don't know	1	2%
Total	42	100%

The results for question 3 are as follows: 27 respondents chose the correct answer, meaning this question had a 64% success rate. However, 15 people guessed incorrectly. Of those, 8 have chosen the wrong answer and 7 said they did not know. The overall average number of points gained was 1.07. This question also gathered the biggest number of 'I don't know' answers of all.

Chart 3 – Results of Question 3

Correct	27	64%
Incorrect	8	19%
I don't know	7	17%
Total	42	100%

The fourth question is the first one in the test that included multiple correct answers. Only 10 students successfully selected both correct options without adding an incorrect one and secured the maximum number of points. Following that 6 people selected both correct options, but they chose to select exclusively the word *worry* as well, which yielded them 1.11 points. Three students selected only one correct answer without adding any incorrect ones (0.83 points) and 10 other respondents have selected one correct answer, but they also added one incorrect one – either *dog* or *worry* – securing only 0.28 points in the process. In addition, six people got no points for stating the incorrect answer, either by selecting more wrong answer or by choosing only the incorrect ones. Lastly, four students stated they did not know the answer to the question and three felt that none of the transcriptions were in StAmE. The overall average for this question was 0.68 points, which was the lowest number in the whole test, making this the hardest question of the entire test. What stands out from the results in this question is the word *better*, as this is the word the students guessed correctly as 'American' most of the time.

Chart 4 – Results of Question 4

Completely correct	10	24%
Partially correct	19	45%
Incorrect	6	14%
I don't know	4	10%
None of the above	3	7%
Total	42	100%

The results for question five are as follows: 15 students were able to successfully select both correct answers, which is 36% of all responses. Then, 9 chose the correct answers but additionally selected one wrong option as well, which resulted in 1.11 points. Five students selected only one correct answer overall for 0.83 points. One person selected two correct, as well as two incorrect answers for 0.56 points. Six people selected one correct and one incorrect answer for 0.28 points. Lastly, six people gave more incorrect answers than correct ones getting no points. No student has chosen to answer 'None of the above' or 'I don't know'. The average number of points gained came to 0.99.

Chart 5 – Results of Question 5

Completely correct	15	36%
Partially correct	21	50%
Incorrect	6	14%
I don't know	0	0%
None of the above	0	0%
Total	42	100%

In the last question of the quiz, 14 students were able to successfully distinguish which speakers are American, securing the full number of points in the process. This accounted for 33% of all responses. 15 students made one mistake, either choosing only two correct recordings or one additional, incorrect one, for 1.11 points. 9 other students made two mistakes for 0.56 points and four students made three mistakes and achieved 0 points from the question. Interestingly, eleven students selected the Scottish speaker, thinking he spoke with an American accent. The average amount of points gained from this question was 1.07.

Chart 6 – Results of Question 6

Completely correct	14	33%
Partially correct	24	57%
Incorrect	4	10%
I don't know	0	0%
None of the above	0	0%
Total	42	100%

Overall the test was attempted by 42 students of the LI2BE course. Their overall average was 6.11 points out of ten, which translates to 61.1%. Only eight students were able to achieve 80% or more, with the best mark being 94.4% achieved by one student. The lowest grade was 0%, but this student answered in the first two questions only and then they recorded no answers. Following that, the lowest mark was 2.8%. The overall results can be seen in Figure (15):
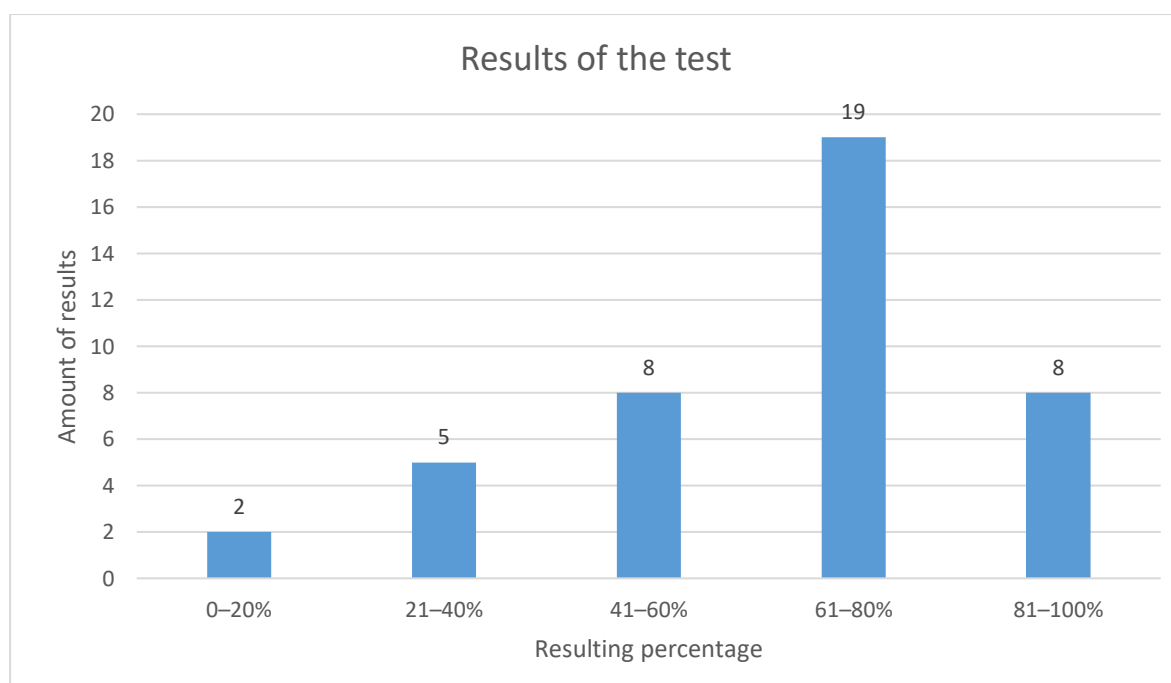

Figure 15 – Overall results of the test

Before the research was even conducted, my expectation was that the students' overall average would be around 75%. This was further reinforced when I received the results of the questionnaire, where the students claimed to have seen a great number of both British and American films, predominantly without dubbing. Not only that, they admitted they listened

to many English musical interprets, watched English YouTubers or enjoyed English TV Series. I was therefore surprised upon collecting the results of the test, where the average was 14% below my initial expectations. For the results to be more conclusive though, further testing would be needed. Ideally, more auditory questions would be used, as it is possible the students were not able to understand what they were reading at a given time. In this test however, I wanted to examine specific features and, since I had no contact to native speakers, it was best for me to include them in the way of transcriptions.

After I analysed each answer separately, there were several facts that surprised me. The first one was that each question gathered more incorrect answers than 'I don't know' ones, despite the fact that the students were deliberately told to state as such unless they were reasonably confident they know the answer. Firstly, I thought that they could not perceive the differences because of the transcriptions, but that was soon disproved by the fact that the auditory questions received a considerable amount of incorrect responses as well.

The second interesting fact appeared in the fourth question. Here, only ten students were able to select the correct answers. However, several respondents thought that words *worry* (/ˈwʌri/) and *dog* (/dɒg/) were transcribed in American. These two answers were responsible for nearly all incorrect and partially correct responses.

Next surprise came in the last question of the quiz, where the students were asked to listen to six recordings and then choose which ones were recorded by an American speaker. Most students were able to safely recognise at least one of the speakers, but then they selected either one of the British ones or, in eleven cases, the Scottish speaker. It is that number of students who opted for the narrator from Scotland that surprised me about this question. This is because Scottish accent is distinct from both RP and GenAm in different ways, such as in the pronunciation of *spoons* or *snake*, which I thought would be more obvious to the students.

Overall, the results show that without any lectures or linguistic training, the students are not able to definitively differentiate between two native accents of the English language, despite their evident and frequent exposure to them.

3 Conclusion

3.1 Summary of the Research

This bachelor thesis was designed to find out which accents of the English language are the most familiar to the undergraduate students of the Technical University of Liberec. It then focused on how well these students, specifically the ones in the LI2BE course in the summer semester, can differentiate between these two major accents. Further, it also introduces the principle characteristics as well as key differences between them. The theoretical part of this thesis helps the reader to understand the term accent and chooses one definition of the term that is then adhered to throughout the thesis. It also helps raise the awareness of the difference between the terms dialect and accent, which is often overlooked. Furthermore, it shows how accents emerge and change in time. Then, the two main accents used for the thesis, which were chosen based on the results of the questionnaire, are introduced. These are Received Pronunciation and General American, which represent the British and American accent respectively. The theoretical section not only describes the features of these two accents but also summarizes the key perceptible differences between the two accents without which the accents would be the same. As already mentioned, RP and GenAm are considered to be the standards for their original accent, which was the main reason why they were chosen as the focus of this research. The main purpose of the practical section was twofold: to discover which accents would be the most recognizable for students by testing them on their discriminatory skills; to escribe and analyse the results of both the questionnaire as well as a follow-up test which were used for purposes of this research.

The results of the questionnaire were evaluated by means of a quantitative analysis by the assessment of each of the questions and statements. The results confirm the predictions as they show that British and American English are predominant influences when mainstream media and travel is concerned. It also shows that the vast majority of students are exposed to both accents equally.

Although my research was limited by time and an ongoing global pandemic, it reveals that without any training or guidance with regards to accents the students of the first year at the Technical University of Liberec, with English as one of their subjects were not be capable of safely distinguishing with any degree of certainty two major accents of the English

language, even though they are exposed to them in all kinds of media and real-life situations on a regular basis.

3.2 Implications of the Research

Being able to understand and discriminate between different accents of English might not at first glance seem as important a skill, as say, mastering aspects of the morphology of the language. However, in my view, a greater emphasis should be put on teaching students about the various accents of English than there currently is at the Technical University of Liberec's English Department. This is because English is used by many nations around the world as a primary language and thus has a plethora of accents, which are highly likely to pose an obstacle for learners when trying to understand native speakers from different English speaking countries. While some textbooks do include a few remarks with regards to different words used by some English dialects – usually the British and American – I firmly believe that it is not enough, as only the vocabulary is addressed, not the different pronunciation.

Since the ability to recognise different English accents rarely arises from simply being exposed to the language, as the results of my research strongly indicate, it is important to focus on the teaching of accents. This may be achieved in a number of ways. Firstly, the topic could be included in the linguistics syllabus for undergradueates of English. This would mean that the lecturer would dedicate part of a lecture secture to specifying the characteristics and differences between different accents. The accents taught would be the most common ones encountered by non-native speakers of English, for example, a few representatives of the accents found in the United States, Great Britain or Australia. With modern media and technology at a teacher's disposal, audio materials could be developed to train learners to discriminate between various accents. As far as materials for the schools are concerned, since most coursebooks include a CD with recordings, exercises could be accompanied by narration from native speakers, which would help learners further, since they would be receiving the auditory response as well. Most importantly though, students themselves can find help and information outside of the classroom, especially if they were directed by the teacher. A simple reminder from the tutor or homework could cause students to research the topic and learn about the differences, thus enriching themselves with the ability to recognise accents such as those used in popular films with which they are already familiar and further orient themselves in the world of the English language.

3.3 Suggestion for Further Research

Finally, it is important to note that if further research concerning this topic were carried out, there would be several ways of expanding it. Firstly, more accents could be used for the test, as even the questionnaire showed that the students were exposed to more accents than just the two observed ones. Besides this, English is an extremely rich language with great regional variation, and accents not included in this research could therefore be used. Secondly, the same test could be applied to different groups of students, both undergraduates and as graduates. In this way, it would be possible to ascertain whether longer exposure to the language with intensive learning of other language related skills could improve one's ability to recognise accents. Finally, further research could test the same group of students twice; before and after a lesson with a simplified introduction to the accent and their respective features. Thus, the impact of having such lessons could be observed and introduced to the discussion. All in all the topic of accents of English is a fascinating field for both native and non-native speaker researchers. They are well worth learning about, as we encounter them everytime we listen to a native speaker of English and we can tell a lot about them simply from the way they speak.

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List of appendices

Appendix A: The questionnaire

Students' Exposure to the English Language

The goal of this questionnaire is to find out how often and what types of English language our students come into contact with the most. Thank you for your time.

1. Are you a male or a female? *

○ Male

○ Female

2. Have you ever been on holiday in an English speaking country? *

○ Yes

○ No

3. If you have answered yes to the previous question, could you elaborate where exactly you have been?

Text dlouhé odpovědi

4. What amount of movies do you watch in English? *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I only watch movies with a Czech voiceover	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	All movies I watch are in English

5. Try to name as many movies you have seen in English as you can. You can give their names in Czech. *

Text dlouhé odpovědi

6. Try to name as many TV Shows that you watch/have watched in English. You can give their names in Czech. *

Text dlouhé odpovědi

7. Do you have any favourite English-speaking actors? If so, which ones?

Text dlouhé odpovědi

8. Do you watch any English speaking YouTubers? If yes, where are they from? *

Text dlouhé odpovědi

9. Do you play videogames in English? If so, which ones? *

Text dlouhé odpovědi

10. What English speaking singers do you listen to? *

Text dlouhé odpovědi

Appendix B: An example of a filled out questionnaire

59

Students' Exposure to the English Language

The goal of this questionnaire is to find out how often and what types of English language our students come into contact with the most. Thank you for your time.

*Povinné pole

---

1. Are you a male or a female? *

○ Male
◉ Female

---

2. Have you ever been on holiday in an English speaking country? *

◉ Yes
○ No

---

3. If you have answered yes to the previous question, could you elaborate where exactly you have been?

United Kingdom

---

4. What amount of movies do you watch in English? *

         1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I only watch movies with a Czech voiceover ◉○○○○○○○○○ All movies I watch are in English

---

5. Try to name as many movies you have seen in English as you can. You can give their names in Czech. *

Sorry, cant remember no one

---

6. Try to name as many TV Shows that you watch/have watched in English. You can give their names in Czech. *

Top Gear

---

7. Do you have any favourite English-speaking actors? If so, which ones?

Will Smith, Rowan Atkinson

---

8. Do you watch any English speaking YouTubers? If yes, where are they from? *

No

---

9. Do you play videogames in English? If so, which ones? *

No

---

10. What English speaking singers do you listen to? *

Leona Lewis, Tracy Chapman, Adele, Sia

Appendix C: The first page of the test

LI2BE: Phonetics and Phonology SS 2019/2020 (NSK)

Question 1

Not yet answered

Marked out of 1.00

⚑ Flag question

⚙ Edit question

Here are two transcriptions of the word *teacher*. Which one corresponds with a **Standard American** accent?

Select one:
- ○ a. / tiːtʃə/
- ○ b. / tiːtʃər/
- ○ c. I don't know

Question 2

Not yet answered

Marked out of 1.00

⚑ Flag question

⚙ Edit question

You will now watch a one minute long clip in which a YouTuber is reviewing a film. Listen to the **narrator** and decide, whether he is speaking with a **British accent** or a **Standard American accent.**

Select one:
- ○ a. He has an American accent
- ○ b. He has a British accent
- ○ c. He has a different accent
- ○ d. I don't know

Question 3

Not yet answered

Marked out of 1.00

⚑ Flag question

⚙ Edit question

Which transcription of the word *assume* represents the word as spoken in **RP (a British accent)**?

Select one:
- ○ a. /əˈsjuːm/
- ○ b. /əˈsuːm/
- ○ c. I don't know

Appendix D: The second page of the test

LI2BE: Phonetics and Phonology SS 2019/2020 (NSK)

Question 4
Not yet answered
Marked out of 1.00
⚑ Flag question
⚙ Edit question

Which of these transcriptions represent the words as pronounced with a **Standard American accent**?
They are either transcribed in an American or British accent, not any other.

Select one or more:
- ☐ a. /ˈkɑːmədi/ - comedy
- ☐ b. /ˈletə/ - letter
- ☐ c. /ˈbeʈər/ - better
- ☐ d. /dɒg/ - dog
- ☐ e. /ˈwʌri/ - worry
- ☐ f. None of the above
- ☐ g. I don't know

Question 5
Not yet answered
Marked out of 1.00
⚑ Flag question
⚙ Edit question

Which of these transcriptions represent the words as pronounced in **RP**?
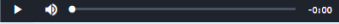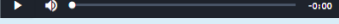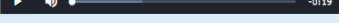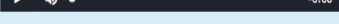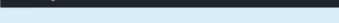They are either transcribed in an American or British accent, not any other.
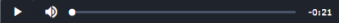
Select one or more:
- ☐ a. /fɑː/ - far
- ☐ b. /kɔːrd/ - cord
- ☐ c. /djuːk/ - duke
- ☐ d. /ˈbɑːðər/ - bother
- ☐ e. /sɑlt/ - salt
- ☐ f. None of the above.
- ☐ g. I don't know.

Question 6
Not yet answered
Marked out of 1.00
⚑ Flag question
⚙ Edit question

You will now listen to six different speakers giving the same instructions. Select only those speakers who have an **American accent.**

Select one or more:
- ☐ a.

  ▶ 🔊 ●———————————— -0:21

- ☐ b.

  ▶ 🔊 ●———————————— -0:00

- ☐ c.

  ▶ 🔊 ●———————————— -0:00

- ☐ d.

  ▶ 🔊 ●———————————— -0:19

- ☐ e.

  ▶ 🔊 ●———————————— -0:00

- ☐ f.

  ▶ 🔊 ●———————————— -0:21

- ☐ g. None of the above.
- ☐ h. I don't know.