

Mobility, meritocracy and dialect levelling: the fading (and phasing) out of Received Pronunciation

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1. Introduction: dialect levelling in Britain, 1900-2000

British English in the 20th century has been characterised by **dialect levelling** and **standardisation**. It is probably useful to see this as composed of two stages, running in parallel. The first stage affects the **traditional rural dialects** of the country, once of course spoken by a majority of the population, but by the beginning of the 20th century probably spoken by under 50%. These dialects are very different from standard English in their pronunciation and in their grammar. What has happened is that, over one or more generations, families have abandoned these dialects in favour of a type of English that is more like the urban speech of the local town or city. These more urban ways of speaking have been labelled **modern dialects** or **mainstream dialects** by Peter Trudgill (1998). What most characterises them is that they are considerably more like standard English in phonology, grammar and vocabulary. The outcome of this first stage is that there are fewer differences between ways of speaking in different parts of the country – an example of dialect levelling. The second stage affects these urbanised varieties of English themselves. As anyone who travels round Britain quickly discovers, there are distinctive ways of speaking in each town and city. Sometimes these differences are quite large, and cause difficulties even for British people when they travel round. These dialects are subject to still further levelling, to such an extent that, in the south-east of England around London, it is now quite difficult to tell where a person comes from. The differences are very subtle, purely phonetic ones.

Let us examine some of these features.

1.1 Traditional dialects

Many of the features that made traditional dialects distinctive have been lost; only some are still found in British speech today. Below are some which can still be heard, though in most places they have replaced by standard English forms:

Grammar:

1. Noun plurals: *shoon* 'shoes', *een* 'eyes', *kine* 'cows'

2. Pronouns:

- in the North and Midlands: *tha* 'you' (singular), *hissen* 'himself', *I washed me* 'I washed myself'
- in the Southwest: *her* 'she' (south-west), *I do go shopping on Saturdays* 'I go shopping on Saturdays'

3. Verbs:

- *gang* 'go' (Scotland), *fa* 'fall' (Scotland)
- Forms for 'I am': *I is* (Northwest), *I are* (Midlands), *I be* (Southwest), *I am* (North and East)

Vocabulary:

- Scotland *luin* 'boy', *quine* 'girl', *greet* 'cry'
- Yorkshire: *beck* 'stream', *bairn* 'child'

Phonology:

- Scotland: *nicht* 'night', *dochter* 'daughter', *hame* 'home'
- North: *spian* 'spoon', *bian* 'bone', *reet* 'right'
- North-east: *fower* for 'four', *sivven* for 'seven'
- South-east Midlands: *fut* 'foot', *umman* 'woman'

Sources: Peter Trudgill (1998) *Dialects of England* and Wakelin (1978) *Discovering English Dialects*.

1.2 Modern dialects (1): Which features are the ‘survivors’ of dialect levelling?

Modern dialects preserve some of the features of traditional dialects. These are some of the ‘survivors’ which have not yet been levelled out:

Grammar:

1. Present tense –s in whole verb paradigm, e.g., *I likes, you likes, she likes, we likes, they likes*, in South and Southwest of England
2. Multiple negation: *We don’t want none*
3. Use of *ain’t* for negative auxiliaries *isn’t, aren’t, hasn’t, haven’t*
4. Past tenses of irregular verbs: *I done, I writ, I come, I see*
5. Use of *never* as past tense negative marker: *I never went there yesterday*
6. *them* as demonstrative adjective: *Look at them big spiders*
7. Absence of plural marking on measures of distance and quantity: *two pound, ten mile*.
8. Absence of adverb marking: *he came really quick*

Phonology:

1. Vowel of FOOT appears in *cup* in the Midlands and North of England
2. Vowel of TRAP in words like *bath, dance, last, laugh* in the North and Wales, vowel of PALM, FATHER in the South.
3. Monophthongs in words like GOAT and FACE in the North and Scotland, diphthongs in the South
4. Post-vocalic *r* pronounced in words like CAR, NURSE, FATHERer, NORTH in the Southwest and Scotland. It is absent in the Southeast and North.

1.3 Modern dialects (2): Changes happening right now

The following are recent changes, documented for example in Cheshire et al. (1989) and Williams & Kerswill (1999):

Grammar:

Use of *was* in the positive, but *weren't* in the neg.:

<i>I was</i>	<i>I weren't</i>
<i>you was</i>	<i>you weren't</i>
<i>she was</i>	<i>she weren't</i>
<i>we was</i>	<i>we weren't</i>
<i>they was</i>	<i>they weren't</i>

Phonology:

Consonants

1. Use of glottal stop [ʔ] for /t/ at the end and in the middle of words:

- (i) before a consonant: *let[ʔ] me*
- (ii) before a vowel: *get[ʔ] over*
- (iii) before a pause: *street[ʔ]*
- (iv) in the middle of a word between vowels: *lett[ʔ]er*

This feature has been in London and Glasgow for at least 150 years (why it appeared in two cities so far apart is not known). Since then, the sound has appeared in most of the regional accents and dialects spoken in between. It is also encroaching on RP, so that in the first environment it is now normal, and is frequently heard in the second. (See John Wells's work on this (1994) and on his website.)

2. Replacement of the two 'th' sounds by 'f' or 'v', so that *thin* is the same as *fin*, and *brother* rhymes with *lover*. This is a characteristic London feature, this time not traditionally found in Glasgow, which is spreading very rapidly. Outside the London area, the spread of this feature has taken place in the past 20-30 years only. For instance, in Norwich it is found in speakers born after about 1970, likewise for young adults in the Midlands towns of Birmingham and

Derby, teenagers in Hull and young children in Newcastle and Glasgow. The order of spread seems to be as follows:

1. London area
2. Southeast: e.g., Reading, Milton Keynes
3. Central England (Midlands, East Anglia, South Yorkshire): e.g., Birmingham, Derby, Norwich and Sheffield
4. Northern England: Hull
5. North-east of England and Lowlands of Scotland: e.g., Newcastle, Glasgow

The feature is not yet reported for Cardiff, Liverpool and Edinburgh, or at least it is only sporadic there. (Source: Foulkes & Docherty 1999 (eds.) *Urban Voices*, various chapters)

Vowels

1. The vowel of MOUTH. This vowel has a range of pronunciations in the South of England, including: [ɛʊ], [ɛɪ], [ɛ:], [a:°], [æʊ], [aʊ]. The first two of these are typically rural pronunciations, the fifth a typical London variant, the last similar to Received Pronunciation. The third and fourth can be regarded as fast-speech variants, even though they are also characteristic of London speech.

Table 1 Percentage use of variants of /aʊ/ (MOUTH), Reading Working Class, interview style

	[ɛʊ]	[ɛɪ]	[ɛ:]	[a:°]	[æʊ]	[aʊ]
Survey of English Dialects informants, 1950-60s (Orton et al., 1968)	✓					
Elderly age 70-80 (n=4)	53.5	38.1	3.3	0	4.1	0.7
Girls age 14 (n=8)	0	2.3	0	8.0	0	90.4
Boys age 14 (n=8)	3.8	3.2	0	5.7	0	87.1

Table 2 Percentage use of variants of /aʊ/ (MOUTH), Milton Keynes Working Class, interview style

	[ɛʊ]	[ɛɪ]	[ɛ:]	[a:ʰ]	[æʊ]	[aʊ]
Survey of English Dialects informants, 1950-60s (Orton et al., 1968)	✓					
Elderly age 70-80 (n=4)	63.2	25.6	9.8	0	1.2	0
Women age 25-40 (n=48)	0	0	11.7	17.2	38.6	31.5
Girls age 14 (n=8)	0	0	0	5.9	4.7	88.8
Boys age 14 (n=8)	0	0	0	12.3	3.8	83.1

Tables 1 and 2 show that, in two south-eastern towns, Reading and Milton Keynes, there is a rapid shift from [ɛʊ] and [ɛɪ] towards a more RP-like [aʊ].

2. The vowels of GOOSE and GOAT are being **fronted**. GOOSE is moving from [u:] to [ʊ:] or [y:], sounding like Estonian or German <ü> or even Norwegian <y>. (See Bauer 1985 and Kerswill 2000.) GOAT is likewise being fronted, so that it can be confused with *gate*. Thus, some people mistake ‘coke’ for ‘cake’. These two changes are found in all southern speech, including RP. They are more advanced among non-RP speakers.

In sum, the outcome has been levelling: a convergence of accents and dialects towards each other. In some cases, this leads to southern features being adopted in the whole country. For other features, particularly vowels, this is not so: levelling, instead, is regional in character, usually centred on a big city like Glasgow or Newcastle or Leeds.

2. Economic change in the 20th century as a cause of dialect levelling

Arguably, dialect levelling can be seen as due to three interrelated trends:

- economic changes leading to a more efficient agriculture and hence the loss of rural employment – a process almost complete today. The following figures for the proportion of people living in rural areas shows this:

1831 34% lived in cities

1931 80% lived in cities

1991 90% lived in cities

1990s: 1.2% working in agriculture

- though the increase of people living in towns and cities has been small since the 1930s, this period is characterised by the reduction of the number of people working in agriculture. Although 10% today live in rural areas, only 1.2% work on the land. Rural employment has become more diversified, and commuting is common, leading to a loss of traditional local networks and an expansion of the range of individual personal network ties.
- two world wars meant a change in social roles within the family: women went out to work, and hence had a wider range of social contacts, in addition to family and neighbours. Men, especially in World War 2, met people from a wider range of geographical and social backgrounds.
- the construction of suburbs in the first half of the century, and new towns in the second half (Kerswill & Williams 2000), led to considerable migration out of the big cities to formerly rural areas. This led to great changes in people's networks, and to widespread **dialect contact** (Trudgill 1986; Kerswill forthcoming) in the new neighbourhoods.

One can distil these three factors by saying:

- (1) The movement of people led to greater **dialect contact**
- (2) The movement of people led to radical changes in people's **social networks**, away from strictly local ones comprising family and neighbours to ones that encompass far more strangers and people in different walks of life.

The result is **dialect levelling** with **standardisation**.

3. The social class factor

3.1 Standard English as a class dialect based on written norms

So far, I have deliberately not mentioned a very obvious difference in British English speech: that related to the social class of the speaker. As in all European countries, speakers with a higher level of education and higher-paid jobs speak in a manner that is closer to the standard language than do other people. This happens in a social and political environment where there is a strong economic and social elite which has associations with political and economic power. Usually, the written word is held up as a type of benchmark, or 'standard', against which good and bad language is measured. Command of the written word has always been important for the maintenance of these elites, but it is even more important nowadays with the increase of written communication via e-mail and the Internet. In a very real sense, if you want to be socially and economically upwardly mobile, you need a high level of literacy and a good command of a form of the spoken language which is close to written, literate norms. Unusually, in England, the standard language is strongly associated with a powerful class accent, Received Pronunciation (or BBC, Queen's, Oxford, etc., English)

How does this relate to dialect levelling? I am going to suggest that the answer is more complex than might at first be thought. The most obvious result is the standardisation that I have already described. But as I have indicated, standardisation does not necessarily follow from dialect levelling: it is perfectly possible for dialects to converge without getting closer to the standard – and this happens in some situations.

The mechanism for standardisation lies in the kinds of social networks people have. People with more broadly based (more varied) networks will meet people with a higher social status, most typically at work. They will **accommodate** to them (Giles & Powesland 1975, Giles & Smith 1979) – a phenomenon known as **upward convergence**. The opposite, **downward convergence**, where a higher status person accommodates to a lower status person, is much rarer. This accommodation is thought to happen mainly among adults, not children or adolescents, because in Western societies children and adolescents have much more self-centred, narrower peer groups. This means that standardisation is something that adults do (while children and adolescents do other kinds of levelling).

3.2 The grassroots strike back: Estuary English and its equivalents

The mechanism just discussed is indeed straightforward. But there is a problem with the model. This is that standardisation is *not* an all-pervasive (universal) force. As we have already seen, various aspects of regional speech are being preserved, despite dialect levelling. There are still many non-standard features which are *not* disappearing, and there are some *new* non-standard features, especially pronunciations, like the fronting of GOOSE and GOAT. I will go on to talk about a particular example of the resistance that dialects show against becoming fully standardised and homogenised. This is the kind of southeastern speech that has become known as **Estuary English**.

In the past 10 years, the newspapers have given a good deal of coverage to a ‘new’ accent of the Southeast, said to be centred on the Thames Estuary. This is how the originator of the term, David Rosewarne, defined it:

Estuary English is a variety of modified regional speech. It is a mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation. If one imagines a continuum with RP and popular London speech at either end, Estuary English speakers are to be found grouped in the middle ground. They are ‘between Cockney and the Queen’, in the words of *The Sunday Times*. (Rosewarne 1994a:3)

According to Rosewarne, people arrive at it from two directions, from below and from above. To deal first with the movement from below: people down the years have been ‘correcting’ their speech as they have been increasing their social status. What they get rid of is

grammatically nonstandard features, such as double negatives and the word ‘ain’t’, and past tense forms like *writ* for ‘wrote’, *come* for ‘came’. But, inevitably, they do something with their accent, too. In the Southeast, they avoid the most stigmatised phonetic features. The first to go is so-called h-dropping. It is not ‘done’ to say ‘the ’amster is in the ’ouse’. Some of the glottal stops might be replaced with /t/, as in *water*. Some vowels may change. Thus, for words like MOUTH, a Londoner would replace [ɛ:] (a strong marker of London dialect) with [æʊ] or with RP-like [aʊ]. But much would remain. In other regions, the same effect happens, with people ending up with a regional accent rather than a very local dialect.

Rosewarne claims that this form of speech, at least in the Southeast, is a new sort of standard, replacing RP. He says it is the favoured accent of young upwardly mobile people in all walks of life, including the professions. A claim that is sometimes made is that RP speakers will actually adopt it themselves, and he cites the British violinist Nigel Kennedy as a case in point. The effect is a sort of pincer movement, with both the higher and lower groups converging on this variety. Estuary English has been popularised by Coggle (1993).

The following are characteristic features of Estuary English, heard on a recent talk show:

- glottal stops for /t/, including some between vowels
- vocalised /l/ as in *fill*, giving pronunciations sounding like ‘fiw’
- ‘Cockney’ (London) vowels (broad diphthongs, so that *mace* sounds like RP ‘mice’, *buy* sounds like RP ‘boy’, and *rice* has a vowel resembling that of RP ‘choice’)
- a general absence of h-dropping
- no use of non-standard grammar

I agree with most of what has been said about Estuary English. What I do not agree with is the idea that it is new. ‘Intermediate’ varieties have existed for a long time, as I indicated earlier. What is new, however, is the sheer spread of these kinds of accents. Non-RP versions of standard English can be heard on every radio and television station. The exception, for the time being, is newsreaders on the BBC. But even there, there are now Welsh and Scottish accented speakers – though not, as yet, Estuary speakers! To illustrate the strength of this new movement away from RP I will cite a story told by a friend of mine who explained that he had been disqualified from becoming an announcer on a local radio station because his voice was too ‘cultured’. This is someone who speaks near-RP with a very few

Merseyside (Liverpool) features. Doctors, scientists, lawyers, teachers, lecturers, industrialists and politicians who appear in the media can be heard using mild Estuary English or another mild regional accent, whereas 30 years ago that would have been the exception. The NATO spokesman during the 1999 Kosovan war, Jamie Shea, was entrusted with this highly responsible presentation job despite being a speaker of quite marked Estuary English with a number of London features in his pronunciation. And all this culminated in the appointment in 2000 of Greg Dyke, an Estuary speaker, as Director General of the BBC.

Let us see what kind of provisional conclusion can be drawn at this point in the argument. We are apparently confronted with a situation where there is greater tolerance of variety in British speech. This fits in with the freer moral atmosphere following the 1960s and 70s, with the introduction of more relaxed legislation concerning abortion, contraception and homosexuality, as well as gender equality and race relations laws. There is general agreement that there is greater tolerance of, if not always respect for, ethnic minorities today than 30 years ago. Greater access to education may have increased social mobility. Some commentators have said that all of this is a sign of a move towards a ‘classless society’, something which former Prime Minister John Major said he was aiming for. By this analysis, society and language are following the same democratic path.

3.3 But is it all as rosy as it seems?

However, there is huge resistance to Estuary English among quite large sections of society, as revealed in the persistent complaints in the media. In the past 15 years the papers have been full of editorials, articles and readers’ letters deploring the state of the language. Estuary English – together with, briefly in 1994, Milton Keynes English as we described it in our study (see Kerswill & Williams 2000) – was seen as the root of the evil.

Here is what the late playwright John Osborne wrote about the Milton Keynes accent on 7th August 1994 in the *Daily Mail*:

It was announced last week that Essex girl has been supplanted by the children of Milton Keynes, who uniformly speak with a previously unidentified and hideously glottal accent ... Nothing is more depressing than [Milton Keynes], this gleaming gum-boil plonked in the middle of England. And now there is a home-grown accent to match.

More recently, we find this from a reader (in this case, a well-known singer) on 17th June 2000 in the *Daily Telegraph*:

It is all very well for people to complain about the abuse hurled by fans at the England v Portugal match, but this is hardly surprising when one hears our spoken language under constant attack from the all-pervading virus of “London lad” speak – via the “meeja”, including, alas, Radio 3. I am tired of hearing presenters – from weather girls to news readers – refer to “Chewsday” [Tuesday] ... and to “Alec Shtewart” [Stewart] (who keeps wicket for England) and using “jew” as a word to replace many others, as in “Jew agree?” [Do you agree] or “Jew [due] to rain there was no play at Chrent [Trent] Bridge today” ... The insidious degradation of spoken English saddens me and someone ought to stand up and say “enough”. (P. Skellern)

The following week, seven letters were published agreeing with this correspondent, as against one (mildly) disagreeing. One of the former was the following:

Further examples of mispronunciation involve the “double-o” sound in “noon”, now commonly pronounced “neen”, and the “yew” sound in “news”, which has become “knees”. You don’t believe me? Just listen carefully. (K. Marsden)

All the features parodied in these and other letters and articles are characteristic of working-class speech in Britain. So these pronouncements can be regarded not as ‘racist’ (that would be unacceptable) but as ‘classist’ – even though the features are mostly also used by so-called educated speakers as well – a fact which the correspondents don’t seem to realise.

So what is happening? Where is this tolerance and democracy? If we look at public attitudes as revealed in opinion polls, we do not find the tolerant and open society one might have expected. In the summer of 2000, there was much debate among the media and politicians about asylum seekers, with claims that these individuals were illegal immigrants – and worse. At the same time, there were a number of vigilante campaigns against real and supposed child abusers. Racial abuse is apparently on the increase. So the linguistic views expressed are very much in line with these trends.

There is another way of looking at this. I will start with a paradox. In 1979, Mrs Thatcher came to power as the first woman prime minister. In her 11 years, she transformed certain

aspects of British society. She is perhaps best known for destroying the power of the trade unions, which had had a huge influence up until that time on the economy through their encouragement of economically damaging and socially divisive strikes. The paradox is this. Not only did she undermine the representatives of the workers (the unions), but she also set herself against any kind of traditional, entrenched power base or vested interest. In particular, she set herself against the power of the ‘old school tie’, an expression which means that people who went to particular prestigious schools or universities, especially Eton College (a well-known ‘public school’) and Oxford and Cambridge universities, stood a much better chance than other people of getting a good job in banking, the law, the civil service and the diplomatic service, as well as in other professions. What she espoused was what Michael Young in his 1958 book called “the rise of the meritocracy” – meritocracy being a term which he coined to refer to the outcome of the following formula:

$$\text{IQ (intelligence quotient) + effort = merit}$$

In 1980s Britain, we saw the media creations of the “yuppies” and “Essex man”, referring to well-to-do, self-made young people who were seen by the establishment as lacking in “culture” and “taste”. These people, typically, spoke Estuary English – they were upwardly mobile, and so had wider social contacts than their parents would have had. As a result, they accommodated to members of their new networks by removing some of the more marked features of their local accents and dialects. Mrs Thatcher had a number of non-RP speakers in her cabinet, notably Norman Tebbit, who spoke with a marked Essex (or Estuary English) accent.

On this analysis, Estuary English is simply a product of this trend towards greater upward mobility. It is not, therefore, a reflection of any greater democratic ideology in society, but a brutal result of new power bases (the newly-wealthy) replacing older ones. The old establishment is very resistant to change, and sticks by RP – even if, like at least one of the letter writers I’ve quoted, they are not RP speakers themselves.

But Estuary English – and the regionally accented speech of the other regions – does serve a useful function. It has drawn attention to the ridiculousness of having a single, monolithic accent, which, moreover, is very much a class accent. Few other countries share this belief in the ‘rightness’ of such a class accent. Many people do not think Mrs Thatcher did much good for Britain. Paradoxically, breaking down the old class barriers might have been one good thing she achieved, and the concomitant rise of Estuary English another.

Websites

If you are interested in Estuary English and recent changes in British English, look first at the *Estuary English website*, run by John Wells at University College London. It contains numerous articles, newspaper reports, commentaries, and even whole theses written on the subject:

<http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary/home.htm>

Also have a look at the *Routes of English website*, based on the BBC Radio series:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/routesofenglish/index.shtml>

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