

---

# Accommodating Estuary English

DAVID LEVEY and TONY HARRIS

A study in accentual compromise

---

THERE IS something in the very name *Estuary English* which fills certain sectors of British society with horror and fear, as if we were in the presence of a contagious and potentially devastating disease. It can provoke what John Maidment (1994:7) termed the 'Disgusted-of-Tunbridge-Wells Syndrome' (DTWS):

Nothing is likely to enrage DTW more than the suggestion that the standard language which he/she holds so dear, the grail of which he/she sees him/herself the guardian, is usurped by the usage of people who are NOT OUR CLASS. DTW is not going down without a fight, you may be sure.

This *Times*-reading, *Radio 4*-listening guardian of the English language, armed with pen and paper, is ready to pick up on mispronunciations, misspellings, and misusages of grammar and send in a letter of complaint, bemoaning the decline of the language. Here is a typical example of his work (from the *Sunday Times*, 21 March 1993):

The spread of Estuary English can only be described as horrifying. We are plagued with idiots on radio and television who speak English like the dregs of humanity, to the detriment of our children.

However, noble as his fight may be, the DTW is, more often than not, fighting a losing battle. Like King Canute, he is trying to stem the unstoppable. The English language has always evolved and will continue to do so. It is, of course, the prerogative of every elder generation to criticise the speech trends of the younger generation, lamenting falling standards in language and yearning for a golden bygone age – a fallacy which Jean Aitchinson (1996) calls the 'Crumbling Castle Syndrome'. However, there has never been, nor can there

ever be, an age of phonetic perfection. We simply measure the pronunciation of the present by the standards of our own past.

The term *Received Pronunciation* (RP) was first introduced in 1926 and has somehow, somewhat remarkably, survived until today. It was adopted by Daniel Jones in the third edition of his *English Pronunciation Dictionary* in preference to the term *Public School Pronunciation* which he had used in the previous editions. It has remained a phonetic term, but it took almost forty years before it entered the *Oxford*

---

DAVID LEVEY currently lectures in Phonetics and Phonology at the University of Cádiz (Spain), where his special areas of interest are dialectology, accent variants, International English and bilingualism. He is currently carrying out linguistic and phonetic research into the state and status of the English and Spanish spoken in Gibraltar. He has also worked for many years in EFL and ESL in Spain and England as a teacher, teacher trainer and external examiner. He has written various articles on language teaching and pronunciation as well as writing and contributing to course books and manuals.

TONY HARRIS trained as a teacher and taught in the English state secondary school system before reading his PhD in Education at the University of Birmingham. He moved to Spain in 1991 and now lectures in Applied Linguistics and L2 Writing in the English Department at the University of Granada. He was President of GRETA (the English Teachers' Association for Andalucía) from 1996–2000 and his research interests revolve around practical issues connected with English language teaching. He is currently involved in a web-based research project designed to increase the vocabulary size of English Philology students in his department.

S0266078402003036

*English Today* 71, Vol. 18, No. 3 (July 2002). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2002 Cambridge University Press

17

*English Dictionary* in 1964. This is not to say, however, that the accent labelled 'RP' has remained static. Indeed, it has undergone considerable changes over the years. One need only listen to the phonetic recordings of three generations of phoneticians who have held the prestigious Chair of Phonetics at University College London – Daniel Jones, A. C. Gimson, and John Wells – to see how far 'acceptable pronunciation' has progressed in a relatively short time.

It is in this light that we should view what has controversially become known as *Estuary English* (EE). Despite recent interest and media coverage, it is not a brand-new discovery or invention. As Wells points out: 'EE is a new name. But it is not a new phenomenon. It is a continuation of a trend that has been going on for five hundred years or more' (1997:47).

The name *Estuary English* first appeared in 1984, in an article published in the *Times Educational Supplement*, in which David Rosewarne describes 'a newly observed variety of English pronunciation', defined as 'modified regional speech... a mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation' (1984:29). In due course, Wells modified the definition to 'standard English spoken with an accent that includes features localizable in the southeast of England' (1998).

The Estuary snowball rapidly gained momentum during the 1980s and 1990s, opening up debates in academic and journalistic circles. Various newspaper articles and an easy-to-read, light-hearted paperback written by Paul Coggle, *Do You Speak Estuary?*, helped to popularise it.

The accent supposedly grew out of a combination of demographic factors. The rehousing of many Londoners after the wartime Blitz and evacuation to various parts of Southern England led to their native London speech being modified by the adoptive home accent, with this new hybrid pronunciation being consolidated by the following generation. Other factors, such as increased social mobility, particularly during the 1960s, and the fact that more and more people began commuting into the city of London from further and further afield, aided its spread.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that, although there are various indications that EE is extending to the Midlands, Liverpool, the North East, and even over the border into Scot-

land (Harris, 1999; Marks, 1999), it still remains fundamentally a regional accent based in the South-East and spoken principally around the Thames Estuary.

If truth be told, the status of EE is questionable, and various writers (for example, John Maidment, 1994) have expressed doubts about the legitimacy of classifying it as an accent. A close study of its most distinguishing features reveals nothing phonetically *new* and most of its features are in fact present in RP and/or Cockney. For further information on the distinguishing features of EE and their phonetic description, see Wells (1992, 1994a, 1994b), Maidment (1994) and Levey (2001) amongst others.

The hybrid effect is assumed to be a fundamentally non-class-based accent spoken by a large cross-section of people from London and the Home Counties, which may be seen as a halfway house between two phonetic extremes. In a British class society, in which a person's accent can still reveal far more than simply geographical origins, EE offers some sort of refuge. RP, to many, sounds *posh* or *superior*, while a Cockney accent may have *hard*, *dishonest*, *uneducated* or *comic* connotations. Cinema, TV and the media have helped to enhance these stereotypes, where RP speakers are habitually portrayed as superior snobs, while Cockneys are still foul-mouthed criminals with little education or manners.

Although some might argue that these stereotypes are changing, it still seems true to say that Cockney politicians, academics and intellectuals have to struggle that much harder to be taken seriously and to gain the trust and respect of the listener. Similarly, a *posh* accent in the mouth of, say, a Communist or a Trade Unionist talking about equality might sound faintly incongruous.

There is a natural tendency in many of us to adapt our accents and pronunciation to suit our needs and that of our audience. Adopting EE consciously or unconsciously can help avoid rejection through pigeon-holing. *Accommodation Theory* can go a long way to explaining the sociolinguistic effects of EE.

This approach had its beginnings in the early 1970s, when research by Giles (1973) into the role of interpersonal accent convergence in an interviewer/interviewee situation established the 'accent mobility' model. Subsequent research led to the development of *Speech Accommodation Theory* (SAT), which later

broadened into *Communication Accommodation Theory* (CAT). The theory fundamentally claims that we tend to adapt our speech using accommodation strategies, either *converging* towards or *diverging* away from our listener. We do this for any of three principal reasons: (1) to gain the approval of our interlocutor(s); (2) to maintain a positive social identity; (3) to promote communicative efficiency. For fuller information on CAT and SAT see: Giles & Smith (1979); Thakerar *et al.* (1982); Beebe & Zuengler (1983); Giles (1984); Giles, & Coupland and Coupland (1991), among others.

The first two motives are particularly relevant to EE. Take, for example, the interpersonal accent scenario of the traditional RP speaker who might modify his speech, knowingly or otherwise, in the company of someone with a regional accent to avoid being classified as *posh* or *superior*. By, say, adding a few glottal stops, eliding a few “t”s or vocalising his “l”s, the speaker perhaps hopes to avoid a class judgement on the basis of his pronunciation. This accommodation strategy has been termed *downward convergence* (i.e., adapting ones speech away from a ‘prestige’ model) and is common among young middle-class speakers whose natural accent might not afford them the *street credibility* necessary to gain access to a desired reference group.

From the other end of the accent spectrum, a Cockney might *converge upwardly* towards an RP accent when communicating with those of different social and educational background or in formal situations. His or her underlying motive is to avoid the negative Cockney stereotypes mentioned above. The third possible motive for accommodation, that of ‘promoting communicative efficiency’ might also come into play, since the modification of a natural Cockney into a somewhat less extreme EE might, in some cases, be done to aid comprehension.

While *convergence* is a strategy to identify and show affinity with the interlocutor, *divergence*, by contrast, is often an external statement of in-group identity and a way of distancing oneself from the interlocutor. Thus, a speaker when speaking with someone with a recognised higher prestige accent, might deliberately maintain or even accentuate his speech patterns as a statement of social affiliation.

EE is not a fixed point on the accent scale, but forms a grey area and depending on factors such as the speaker’s social and educational starting point, he/she may be closer to the RP

or Cockney end of the scale. The resulting accent might be natural or *contrived*. In many ways, adopting an Estuary accent can be seen as a compromise – a no-man’s land between two poles. Sounding somewhat more “correct” than Cockney, yet remaining an accent *of the people*. The natural RP speaker might elide, glottalise or vocalise to gain *street cred*, while at the other end of the continuum, the Cockney might refine his pronunciation to avoid type-casting and afford freer social mobility.

In a country where, in the words of George Bernard Shaw, ‘it is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him’, relative neutrality has its advantages. By choosing a middle ground, the EE speaker is playing the odds and opting for wider approval, without compromising his/her social identity too much. In a world where public relations are ever more important, it is arguably more advantageous to be matey than trying to impress the listener at the risk of alienating him/her. Whereas before the 1960s, RP defined a minimum requirement for social and professional advancement, today it may even be considered a handicap to speak in what some may deem to be a *posh* accent.

The rigid British class system of old is gradually breaking down. In the past, limited inter-class interaction meant that accommodation strategies were not so important. Today, however, it is increasingly necessary to communicate with a wide variety of English accents and pronunciation, not just on a local but a global scale. It seems clear that the future of communication in a wider context depends on tolerance and a capacity for adaptation. In this sense, accommodation seems natural as a means of ensuring mutual intelligibility and understanding on both linguistic and social levels. ■

## References

- Aitchison, J. 1996. *The Language Web*. Transcriptions from the Reith Lectures, London: BBC.
- Beebe, L. & J. Zuengler. 1983. ‘Accommodation theory: an explanation for style shifting in second language dialects.’ In N. Wolfson & E. Judd, eds, *Sociolinguistics and Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House.
- Coggle, P. 1993. *Do You Speak Estuary?* London: Bloomsbury.
- Ellis, A. J. 1869-89. *On early English pronunciation*, 1-5. London: Philological Society.
- Giles, H. 1973. ‘Accent mobility: a model and some data.’ In *Anthropological Linguistics* 15: 87-105.
- Giles, H. & P. Smith. 1979. ‘Accommodation theory:

- optimum levels of convergence.' In H. Giles & R. St Clair, eds, *Language and Social Psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Giles, H., ed. 1984. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language. The Dynamics of Speech Accommodation*. Amsterdam: Mouton.
- Giles, H., N. Coupland, & J. Coupland, eds. 1991. *Contexts of Accommodation Developments in Applied Linguistics*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Harris, G. 1999. 'Glasgow puts an accent on Estuary.' In *The Times*, London, 20 February.
- Levey, D. 2001. 'Is EFL ready for EE?' In Levey *et al.*, eds., *English Language Teaching: Changing Perspectives in Context*. Cádiz: Universidad de Cádiz.
- Maidment, J. 1994. 'Estuary English: Hybrid or Hype.' In the 4th New Zealand Conference on Language & Society, Lincoln University, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Marks, K. 1999. 'Scouse is threatened by the rising tide of Estuary English.' In *The Independent*, London, 1 June 1999. See <http://phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary/home.htm>
- Roach, P. & J. Hartman, eds. 1997. *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (Daniel Jones, 15th Edition). Cambridge: University Press.
- Rosewarne, D. 1984. 'Estuary English.' In the *Times Educational Supplement*, 19 Oct: 29.
- . 1994. 'Estuary English: tomorrow's RP.' In *English Today* 37:3–8.
- Thakerar, J. N., H. Giles, & J. Cheshire. 1982. 'Psychological and linguistic parameters of speech accommodation theory.' In C. Fraser & K. R. Scherer, eds, *Advances in the Social Psychology of Language*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Wells, J. C. 1994a. 'Transcribing Estuary English.' In *Speech, Hearing and Language*, 8, *UCL Work in Progress*: 261–7
- . 1994b. 'Recommendations for standardized phonetics of Estuary English' (handout from a talk given in Heidelberg, November 1994).
- . 1997. 'What is Estuary English?' In the *English Teaching Professional*, 3 April, pp. 46–7.
- . 1998. 'Pinning Down Estuary English.' Abstract from a lecture given in Lund, Sweden, April.

**Note** Harris 1999, Maidment 1994, Marks 1999, Thakerar *et al.* 1982, and Wells 1994b, 1997, 1998 can be viewed at <http://phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary/home.htm>

The screenshot shows the Cambridge Journals online interface. At the top, it says 'English Today now available at Cambridge Journals online'. Below this is a navigation bar with links for 'About CJO', 'Help', 'Contact Us', 'cambridge.org', 'Terms of Use', and 'Privacy'. The user is logged in as 'Guest' from 'Cambridge University Press'. There are buttons for 'Browse Journals', 'Account Options', and 'Help'. A search bar is visible with the text 'Quick Search' and a 'Go' button. The search results are displayed on 'Page 1' and show 7 matches. The first three results are:

- 0% Lines and circles, West and East  
Zuo Biao  
English Today, Volume 17, Issue 03, July 2001. pp3-8  
[abstract] [add to Basket]
- 0% Cantonese particles in Hong Kong students' English e-mails  
Gregory James  
English Today, Volume 17, Issue 03, July 2001. pp9-16  
[abstract] [add to Basket]
- 0% Digital age, digital English  
Gao Liwei  
English Today, Volume 17, Issue 03, July 2001. pp17-23  
[abstract] [add to Basket]