

# Editorial

The *VoiceBank* is an extensive collection of voice recordings recently submitted to the British Library by members of the public, in which participants were asked to describe their own accents. Non-native speakers and those who felt they had recognisably local accents found this pretty straightforward, as terms like Dutch, Chinese, Brummie (or Birmingham) and so on are widely used and generally understood reference points. However, it presented a much greater challenge to two substantial groups of contributors: those who claimed to have ‘no accent’; and those who acknowledged multiple influences on their accent as a result of family background, frequent re-location, education, occupation and so on.

For the former group, conventional terms like *Received Pronunciation (RP)* and the popular label *BBC English* were frequently used to describe a geographically neutral British accent, but many contributors chose terms that perhaps reveal more about their feelings and attitudes towards their own speech. Some descriptors suggest implicit approval of, even admiration for, the accent – *well-spoken, clear, standard, proper English*; other terms convey positive (or at least neutral) notions of social status and prestige – e.g. *normal, middle-class, public school, Queen’s English*; but others offer a fascinating glimpse of some RP speakers’ private dismay at a comparative lack of geographic affiliation or distinctive character – *middle England, not from anywhere in particular, bland, generic, neutral, colourless*.

Unlike local accents, where terms like ‘broad’ or ‘mild’ offer fine distinctions between speakers from the same speech community, there are no conventional terms for describing the spectrum of accents that are not regionally identifiable. Many speakers of such accents chose relatively objective descriptor terms that convey a sense of features combined from two or more accents – *amalgamation, blend, pick ‘n’ mix* and *Heinz 57* (a reference to the famous advertising slogan of the Heinz food

company now generally used to mean ‘containing parts of many different origins’); others focused on a tendency to vary according to circumstance – *malleable, chameleon, everywhere and nowhere, wandering accent syndrome*; yet others used labels that imply a perceived lack of ‘purity’ – *mish-mash, mongrel, mixed bag, modified, contaminated, diluted, hotchpotch, muddle*.

Given the current interest among linguists in the relationship between language and identity, the collection offers fascinating insights into how people view their own accents. Impressionistically, it certainly confirms a view of variety predominantly as extremely positive, and ‘flavour’ (or, conversely, a perceived lack of it) as a source of great pride (or regret). Such sentiments will, we sense, be of great interest to variationists, but we also wonder whether they might contribute to EFL debates – much discussed in these pages – about the relative merits of acquiring native-like pronunciation or retaining local and/or national ‘personality’.

This is the final issue of *English Today* under the present editorial team (although one of our number will continue to serve). Inter alia exploring the relationship between English and the Chinese, Spanish, German, Kiswahili, and French languages, and topics that include word formation, acronyms and abbreviations, competition between languages in the economic sphere, language choice for education, and phonology, along with a range of book reviews, our contributors continue to fulfil the brief of addressing the forms and functions of English in its worldwide setting. In our twenty *ET* issues (2013–17) we have sought to uphold the high scholarly standards set by our predecessors: our work has assuredly brought us unexpected pleasures and taught us much: we know that the new Editor, Andrew Moody of the University of Macau, and the team he assembles will receive the same rewards, and wish them and all readers of this journal every future success.

*The editors*

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The editorial policy of *English Today* is to provide a focus or forum for all sorts of news and opinion from around the world. The points of view of individual writers are as a consequence their own, and do not reflect the opinion of the editorial board. In addition, wherever feasible, *ET* generally leaves unchanged the orthography (normally British or American) and the usage of individual contributors, although the editorial style of the journal itself is that of Cambridge University Press.