
What is Estuary English?

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There's a new buzzword going the rounds in England — Estuary English (EE). It's supposed to be a new kind of English that's due to take over as the new standard English. We're told it's going to replace fuddy-duddy old Received Pronunciation as the standard accent. Not only are all sorts of politicians, sportsmen, and media personalities claimed as typical speakers of it, but even people as eminent as Queen Elizabeth's youngest son, Prince Edward.

But at the 1995 Conservative party conference the Minister of Education, Gillian Shephard, launched into a denunciation of EE, condemning it as slovenly, mumbling, bastardized Cockney. She claimed that teachers have a duty to do their utmost to eradicate it.

As often happens in language matters, the English have got into a muddle.

The term 'Estuary English' was coined as long ago as 1984 by David Rosewarne, an EFL teacher. He characterized it as 'a variety of modified regional speech [...] a mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation. If one imagines a continuum with RP and London speech at either end, "Estuary English" speakers are to be found grouped in the middle ground.'

Rosewarne claims that Estuary English, named after the 'banks of the Thames and its estuary', is to be heard in the House of Commons, the City, the Civil Service, local government, the media, advertising, and the medical and teaching professions in the south-east.

In 1993 the London *Sunday Times* reported that Estuary English was 'sweeping southern Britain'. A few months later Paul Coggle published his popular paperback *Do You Speak Estuary?*, triggering another bout of media publicity. (Coggle is a university senior lecturer in German, and his book is actually very well-informed.) In the *Independent on Sunday* Neal Ascherson claimed that the upper-class young now speak Estuary English, 'the faintly Cockneyfied accent of the South-east'. In 1996, a *Guardian* leader-writer could allude to someone's arriviste social position simply by using the adjective 'estuarian'.

Mrs Shephard seems actually to have misunderstood the term. For her it was 'a form of London dialect with glottal stops' and 'a bastardized version of Cockney dialect'. She did not see it as a variety of Standard English, but as something to be eradicated. Perhaps she had confused 'Estuary' with 'Essex', and with the sociological stereotype of Essex man, the well-paid ex-working-class philistine with more money than taste.

What are the phonetic characteristics of Estuary English (EE)? Many of the features that distinguish it from RP are features it shares with Cockney: things that may mark it as being distinctively south-eastern (as against RP, which is non-localizable within England). But these features are spreading geographically and socially, thus losing their localizability and thus to some extent justifying the claim that EE is ‘tomorrow’s RP’.

Unlike Cockney, EE is associated with standard grammar and usage. But like Cockney it shows tendencies towards such phonetic characteristics as the following:

- **l-vocalization**, pronouncing the l-sound in certain positions almost like [w], so that *milk bottle* becomes ['mɪok ə bɒtɒ] (almost like ‘miwk bottoo’), and *football* becomes ['fʊ?bɔː] (‘foo’baw’). The l-sounds that are affected are those that are ‘dark’ [ɫ] in classical RP, namely those which are *not* immediately followed by a vowel-sound, but rather by a consonant-sound or a potential pause.
- **glottalling**, using a glottal stop [?] (a catch in the throat) instead of a t-sound in certain positions, as in *take it off* [,teɪk ɪ? 'ɒf], *quite nice* [,kwaɪ? 'naɪs]. This is not the same as omitting the t-sound altogether, since *plate* [pleɪ?] still sounds different from *play* [pleɪ]. Nevertheless, authors who want to show a non-standard pronunciation by manipulating the spelling tend to write it with an apostrophe: *take i’ off, qui’ e nice*. The positions in which this happens are most typically syllable-final — at the end of a word or before another consonant sound. London’s second airport, *Gatwick*, is very commonly called ['gæ?wɪk] (“Ga’wick”).
- **happY-tensing**, using a sound more similar to the [i:] of *beat* than to the [ɪ] of *bit* at the end of words like *happy*, *coffee*, *valley*. Many recent works on English phonetics transcribe this weak vowel as [i], which can then be interpreted in various ways according to the speaker’s accent. In strong syllables (stressed, or potentially stressed) it is crucial to distinguish tense long [i:] from lax short [ɪ], since *green* must be distinct from *grin* and *sleep* from *slip*. But in weak syllables this distinction does not apply — the precise quality of the final vowel in *happy* is not so important.
- **yod coalescence**, using [tʃ] (a ch-sound) rather than [tj] (a t-sound plus a y-sound) in words like *Tuesday*, *tune*, *attitude*. This makes the first part of *Tuesday* sound identical to *choose*, [tʃu:z]. The same happens with the corresponding voiced sounds: the RP [dʒ] of words such as *duke*, *reduce* becomes Estuary [dʒ], making the second part of *reduce* identical to *juice*, [dʒu:s].

However, unlike Cockney, EE does not involve, for example,

- **h-dropping**, omitting [h], so that *hand on heart* becomes [,ænd ɒn a:?] (‘and on ’eart); or
- **th-fronting**, using labiodental fricatives ([f, v]) instead of dental fricatives ([θ, ð]). This turns *I think* into [aɪ 'fɪŋk] and *mother* into ['mʌvə].

Phoneticians at University College London have recently been attempting to fix a standard phonetic transcription for EE. This would open up the possibility of teaching it in the EFL classroom, if that were thought desirable. The main problems in standardizing a transcription relate to the notation of certain sequences of vowel plus the residue of vocalized /l/: in standardizing EE, for example, do we retain the RP distinctions *fool* vs *full* vs *fall* ([fu:l, fol, fo:l]), or do we merge them all into [fʊo] as many Londoners do?

Estuary English is a new name. But it is not a new phenomenon. It is the continuation of a trend that has been going on for five hundred years or more — the tendency for features of popular London speech to spread out geographically (to other parts of the country) and socially (to higher social classes). But the erosion of the English class system and the greater social mobility in Britain today means that this trend is more clearly noticeable than was once the case.

Rather than try to adopt EE, perhaps a more realistic aim for EFL teachers and learners would be to make sure that our description of Received Pronunciation keeps up to date. It must not remain fossilized in the form codified by Daniel Jones almost a century ago. We must modernize it by gradually incorporating one or two of the changes typical of EE. To star' with, we migh' le' people use a few glottal stops. Or would tha' not mee' with everyone's approval?

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