

Week 4. Estuary English

1. **The claim:** “‘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 London speech at either end, ‘Estuary English’ speakers are to be found grouped in the middle ground. [...] The heartland of this variety lies by the banks of the Thames and its estuary, but it seems to be the most influential accent in the south-east of England.” (Rosewarne 1984).

2. **The hype:** “Estuary English can nowadays be heard throughout London and the Home Counties and well beyond. [...] as far as the north Norfolk coast, ... the Dorset coast, ...the south Kent coast... beyond the northern boundaries of Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire.” (Coggle 1993: 23, 26-27). Some claim EE is due to replace RP as the educated accent of England (Rosewarne 1994a).

3. My proposed definition of EE:

Standard English spoken with a non-RP, London-influenced accent.

4. EE arguably **differs from Cockney** (i) in using standard grammar and (ii) in lacking stigmatized characteristics such as h-dropping, steady-state MOUTH and intervocalic T glottalling within a word.

Transcribing Estuary English: differences from RP

- for *-ing* optionally write EE /ɪŋ/; for *-thing* optionally write EE /θɪŋk/
- for RP dark /ɪ/, write EE /o/
- for RP /t/ when between {a vowel or sonorant} and {a consonant or word boundary}, write EE /ʔ/
- for RP /tj, dj/, write EE /tʃ, dʒ/
- for RP /aɪ, aʊ/, write EE /aɪ, æʊ/
- for RP /ŋ/ in various positions, write EE /əŋ/
- for *twenty, plenty, want(ed, ing, it, us), went* (before a vowel), in EE optionally omit the /t/

5. The confusion

- *Stylistic variability:* StdE and RP can be informal. Usages such as *cheers, y’know*, or intonation oddities such as accented prepositions are compatible with StdE.
- *Good or bad?* Street cred, modern, up-front, trend-setting (Coggle 1993), tomorrow’s RP? — or ‘a bastardized version of Cockney dialect’, the antonym of good English?

6. **The truth:** Everyone agrees that there is a spectrum of intermediate possibilities between RP and Cockney: ‘popular London English’. If EE is a mere name for this, fine. But Przedlacka has shown that EE is not a single coherent accent ‘sweeping the southeast’.

References (see website www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary)

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- Rosewarne, David, 1994a. ‘Estuary English: tomorrow’s RP?’. *English Today* 37.10.1 (Jan. 1994), 3-8.
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