Estuary English: what is it, and why would anyone speak it?

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A. Estuary English: what is it?
Estuary English: the discovery


The **definition**:

‘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’.
Estuary English: the claims

• Rosewarne’s hypothesis: a new accent
  • A hybrid between RP and Cockney

• A list of features
  • Phonetic: /l/ > [o]
  • Intonation: rise-fall
  • Lexical: there you go; cheers (=thank you)
  • Grammatical: innit?
Estuary English: elaboration of hypothesis I

- **Coggle** (1993) *Do you speak Estuary?*
  - Accepts Rosewarne’s claims
  - Elaborates on his features
  - Gives examples
Estuary English: elaboration of hypothesis II

- **Wells** (1994): gives the claims a more nuanced and thorough examination, regarding
  - **Definitions** and crucial **questions** → consequences
  - Phonetic and phonological **properties**
  - **Transcription**: how do we represent the sound features of EE?
Estuary English: critical voices

- **Maidment** (1994): Hybrid or hype? Very critical
  - Disregard Rosewarne’s claims regarding
    Some sound features (in Cockney or RP too)
    Prepositons, use of rise-fall, use of question tags, lexis

- **Kerswill** (2000): Mildly critical
  - Sth like EE has been around for some time: modified RP
  - Larger perspective: accent levelling, social changes
Estuary English: elaboration of its status

- **Wells** (1994): basic questions regarding the *status* and *existence* of EE
  
  – Is it a *variety/lect/dialect* in its own right, or is it ‘simply the formal style/register for which Cockney is the informal one’? (p.2)
  
  – Depends on the answers to **two empirical** questions:
    
    1. ‘Is there a casual style of EE that is unquestionably distinct from Cockney?’ → **Yes**
    
    2. ‘Is there a formal style of Cockney that is distinct from EE?’ → **Yes**
Estuary English: elaboration of hypothesis

- Wells contd.
  - Where is the **boundary** between RP and EE?
    - Depends on **localisability**
    - ‘EE is localizable as belonging to the southeast of England [...] whereas RP is not’
  - Where is the **boundary** between EE and Cockney?
    - The **presence/absence** of certain features
    - The **standard** grammar of EE

  - Seems to conclude that EE is indeed an **accent**
Estuary English: elaboration of hypothesis

• Wells contd.
  – Proposes **new definition**
    ‘Standard English spoken with the accent of the southeast of England’
  – Highlights **2 major points**
    EE is **standard** (unlike Cockney)
    EE is **localised** in the southeast (unlike RP)
B. Estuary English: what does it sound like?
Reference accents

• To **define** an accent, we need to compare it to others

• → Find out **similarities** and **differences**

• Two reference accents

  - **Received Pronunciation (RP)** = Oxford English, Queen’s English, BBC English

  - **Cockney**: traditional accent of the London working class
Estuary English: the sound features

- **EE differs from Cockney in lacking (1)**
  - **H-Dropping**: dropping of /h/ in lexical words
    
    hand on heart /hænd ɒn hɑː:t/ 
    hot, head /hɔʔ/ /hed/

  - **TH Fronting**: using /f v/ instead of /θ ð/ for ‘th’
    
    think father /θɪŋk ˈfaːðə/ (not /ˈfɪŋk ˈfaːvɚ/)
    brother, Ruth /ˈbrʌðə/ /ruːθ/ (not /ˈbrʌvɚ/ /ruːf/)
Estuary English: the sound features

• **EE differs from Cockney in lacking (2)**
  – **MOUTH** vowel is a diphthong (not a monophthong)
    *mouth* /mæθθ/ (not Cockney /maːf/, nor RP /maʊθ/)
    *house*, *out* /hæʊs/ /æʊt/

  – **T Glottalling**: glottal stop within a word
    *butter* /ˈbʌtə/ (not Cockney /ˈbʌʔə/)
    *cutting* /ˈkʌtɪŋ/ or /ˈkʌtɪn/
Estuary English: sound features

- **EE agrees with Cockney in having (1)**
  - **Happy** tensing: the final vowel in *happy* is tense
    \[\text{happy} \quad [\text{'hæpi}], \quad \text{coffee} \quad [\text{'kɒfi}]\]

- **T Glottalling**: glottal stop in word-final position
  \[\text{take it off} \quad [\text{teɪk} \text{ ï?} \text{ ɒf}]\]
  \[\text{that is} \quad [\text{ðæʔ} \text{ ïz}]\]

- **L Vocalisation**: /l/ is made into a vowel /o/
  \[\text{milk} \quad [\text{mɪok}], \quad \text{bottle} \quad [\text{'bɒto}]\]
Estuary English: sound features

• **EE agrees with Cockney in having (2)**
  – The sequences /tʃ/ /dʒ/ $\rightarrow$ /tʃ/ /dʒ/
    
    *Tuesday* [ˈtʃuːzdeɪ], *reduce* [ˈrɪdʒuːs]

  – **Diphthong shift (?)**
    
    FACE, PRICE, GOAT: [fʌɪs prʌɪs ɡʌʔ]

  – **Striking difference:** /əʊ/ before /l/ and elsewhere
    
    *goat* [ɡʌʔ], *load* /lʌʊd/
    
    but *sold* [sɒʊ(ɫ)d], *roller* [ˈrɔlə]
Estuary English: samples

• David Beckham:  
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvNo_5p_UUA

• Jonathan Ross:  
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_3768240919&feature=iv&src_vid=NruWYK-KA6w&v=la-ExhOh7kA

• Jeff Banks:  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYFleePY3c

• Greg Wallace:  
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWFeVJ5x9g4
Estuary English: the research

• Altendorf (1999):
  – If EE exists → possible to define boundaries
  – 3 variables/sound features: L Vocalisation, T Glottalling, TH Fronting
  – Informants from 3 schools
  – In London
  – Represent 3 social classes, based on fee/tuition
## Estuary English: the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phonetic variables</th>
<th>Cockney</th>
<th>Estuary English</th>
<th>RP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TH Fronting</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T Glottalling intervocalically</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T Glottalling finally</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>(+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L Vocalisation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>(+/-)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table based on Altendorf 1999
Estuary English: the research

- Altendorf (1999): findings
  - **L Vocalisation**: used by all 3 classes; clearly a feature of EE, shared with Cockney
    → May serve as boundary marker between EE and RP
  - **T Glottalling**: difference between Cockney and EE
    → May serve as boundary marker between EE and Cockney (between vowels)
  - **TH Fronting**: occasional in EE and RP
    → May serve as boundary marker betw. Cockney and EE
  - **Conclusion**: EE exists as accent
Estuary English: the research

- **Przedlacka** (2001)
  - Compares SED data and **new** data from Home Counties (Bucks, Kent, Essex, Surrey)
  - To see if there are **new** developments
  - Examines both **vowel** and **consonant** variables
Estuary English: the research

– **Conclusions** (Przedlacka):

  - Some are **new** tendencies; some are **continuations**
  - Most of the changes are led by **women** (-TH Fronting)
  - **Class** is less important (GOOSE and FACE only)
  - A **number** of distinct accents, **not** a uniform variety
  - EE tendencies are part of **general** trends

  - ‘EE is receiving influence rather than exerting it. [...] Possibly, for both RP and EE the source of innovation is Cockney’ (p.48)
C. Estuary English: why?
The accent variation triangle

Fig. 2 Relation between social and regional accents in England (Wells 1982: 14)
The accent variation triangle

- **Complications**
  - **Defining** class membership
    - British class categories – wealth? education? work?
  - **Age** variation
    - Old and conservative v. young and innovative
  - **Sex/gender** differences
    - Male and conservative v. female and innovative
  - **Style** variation
    - Language is affected by social context
  - **Variation** within accents: inherent variability
Attitudes to accents

• **Subjectivity, inconsistency, bias**

• **Relevant** to the study of accent variation?
  
  – Reveals *reasons* why people speak the way they do or change their accents

  – Labels are entirely *haphazard*: varies

    Between *languages* and *accents*

    At different *times*
Attitudes to accents

- **Associations** with speakers and/or areas: **stereotypes**
  - Ideas of **typical** RP speakers, EE speakers, Geordie speakers, etc.
  - Assigning our opinions of **speakers** to **language/accent**
    
    E.g. RP speakers are elitist, educated, powerful, unfriendly

  $\rightarrow$ RP sounds elitist, educated, powerful, unfriendly
Attitudes to accents

**Wells** (1982: 34):

‘to the ordinary native speaker of English his accent is closely bound up with his personality and his perception of it. Our pronunciation reflects our self-image. This is why it can be so devastating for a school-teacher to criticize a pupil’s accent by calling it slovenly or ugly – such criticism is seen as attributing these qualities to the pupil himself, not just to his speech. One’s accent is a part of one’s personal identity.’
Attitudes to accents

- **Overt v. covert prestige**
  
  - **Overt** prestige: prestige associated with an upper-class accent, social and political power, wealth, higher education
  
  - **Covert** prestige: ‘unacknowledged prestige which attaches to working-class speech’ (Wells, p.105)
    
    → Even if certain features are explicitly stigmatised, some speakers still use them

    Has to do with identity; males use such features more often

- Language = identity = status (of whatever kind)
Social changes after WWII

• More efficient **agriculture** ➞ fewer rural/agricultural workers/jobs
  1831: 34% lived in cities; 1931: 80%; 1991: 90%
  Only 1.2% work with agriculture

• Greater **mobility** (physically/regionally, socially)
  Commuting ➞ loss of local networks, broader range of individual networks

• Change in social **roles** in and after the world wars
  More women working ➞ wider range of social contacts
  Men ➞ met people from different geographical/social backgrounds
Social changes and accent levelling

• Speakers have abandoned traditional dialects and adopted a more urban speech

• When faced with alternative realisations of a phoneme, the trend is towards those closest to RP or London

• Spread of phonological features: greater exposure to (prestigious) accents (mass media)

  ➔ Adoption of select features (mix-and-match)
Social changes and accent levelling

• Construction of *suburbs* and new *towns* in 20th century
  → Emigration from town *to country* +
  → Widespread *dialect contact* +
  → Radical changes in *social networks* and ties +
  = Dialect levelling

• New *attitudes* to what status is (fame, mass media)
Social class and standard language

- The **written** language is a benchmark
- Those in **power** speak **closer** to the written language (=RP)
- Those who are socially and economically **upwardly mobile** → imitate RP → standardisation
- The **kinds of social networks** people have → **accommodation** to speech of others
  - **Upward** convergence (overt prestige)
  - **Downward** convergence (covert prestige; EE?)
Social class and standard language

- **Thatcher**: meritocracy = IQ + effort
  - **Democratic**, in that your merits make you
  - **Breaks down** old class barriers
  - **Upwardly** mobile younger people: spoke EE
  - **Estuary English** is
    - ‘a product of this trend towards greater upward mobility’, not ‘greater democratic ideology in society, but a brutal result of new power bases (the newly-wealthy) replacing older ones’ (Kerswill, p.12)
Summing up re accent variation

- **Trends**: accent levelling and standardisation

- Ultimately caused by **social** changes:
  - **Mobility** → exposure to different accents
  - Break-down of old **class** barriers → climbing
  - Different **social networks/ties**
  - Different social **aspirations**
  - **Prestige** and **attitudes** to accents
Estuary English: why?

- **Reasons** for its emergence: socio-linguistic
  - Provides a *middle* ground for
    1. social climbers
    2. those who don’t want the associations of RP
  - Ultimately due to *changes* in *class barriers* in Britain
References


Kerswill, P. 2000. ‘Mobility, meritocracy and dialect levelling: the fading (and phasing) out of Received Pronunciation.’ In Pilvi Rajame (ed.) *British Studies in the New Millennium: Challenge of the Grassroots*.

References


http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary/#art