

[Rosewarne, David, 1984. 'Estuary English'. *Times Educational Supplement*, 19 (October 1984).]

Estuary English

David Rosewarne describes a newly observed variety of English pronunciation.

<http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary/rosew.htm>

The British are well-known for being extremely sensitive about how they and others speak the English language. Accent differences seem to receive more attention here than is general anywhere in the world, including other English-speaking countries. It may be for this reason that native and non-native teachers of English view the matter with considerable interest. Additionally, their own pronunciation is important because it is the model for their students to imitate. The teacher of British English as a foreign language typically chooses Received Pronunciation as the model (or BBC English, Standard English, Queen's English or Oxford English as it is sometimes called). RP (for short) is the most widely understood pronunciation of those in the world who use British English as their reference accent. It is also the type of British English pronunciation that Americans find easiest to understand. It seems, however, that the pronunciation of British English is changing quite rapidly. What I have chosen to term Estuary English may now and for the foreseeable future, be the strongest native influence upon RP.

"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. It is to be heard on the front and back benches of the House of Commons and is used by some members of the Lords, whether life or hereditary peers. It is well established in the City, business circles, the Civil Service, local government, the media, advertising as well as the medical and teaching professions in the south-east. "Estuary English" is in a strong position to exert influence on the pronunciation of the future.

It appears to be a continuation of the long process by which London pronunciation has made itself felt. This started in the later Middle Ages when the speech of the capital started to influence the Court and from there changed the Received Pronunciation of the day.

On the level of individual sounds, or phonemes, "Estuary English" is a mixture of "London" and General RP forms. Although there are individual differences resulting from the speech background and choices of pronunciation made by the speaker, there is a general pattern. An example of this is the use of w where RP uses l in the final position or in a final consonant cluster. An "Estuary English" speaker might use an articulation like a w instead of the RP l as many as four times in the utterance: 'Bill will build the wall.'

Non-Londoners often comment on what they see as the jerkiness of the speech of the capital. This is because of the use of a glottal stop in the place of the t or d found in RP, as in the stage Cockney phrase: "A li'le bi' of breab wiv a bi' of bu'er on i'." This process seems to be analogous to the loss of the t in such words as "Sco'land", "ga'eway", "Ga'wick", "sta'ement", "sea'-belt", "trea'ment", and "ne'work". Not all RP speakers would sound these ts. As would be expected, an "Estuary English" speaker uses fewer glottal stops for t or d than a "London" speaker, but more than an RP speaker.

Similarly the proverbial "Cockney" would be unlikely to pronounce the phonetic /j/ which is found in RP after the first consonant in such words as "news" or "tune". The process of shedding /j/s is now established in RP. Many speakers of current General RP do not pronounce a /j/ after the l of "absolute", "lute", "revolution", or "salute". They would say "time off in loo" rather than "time off in lieu". For many speakers "lieu" and "loo" are now homophones. Similarly it is common not to pronounce the /j/ after the /s/ of "assume", "consume", "presume", "pursuit" or "suit(able)". It could be argued that these are now the established form of current General RP and that those who pronounce the /j/s in these environments are what Professor Gimson would term "Conservative RP speakers". It was he who drew attention to this change in RP. It seems unnecessary to look across the Atlantic for the origin of this change when this pronunciation is so well entrenched in London speech. The likeliest explanation is maybe that of imitation of an "Estuary" pronunciation reinforced by exposure of RP speakers to American English through films and television.

A feature of "Estuary English" which seems to have received no attention to date is the r. This feature is to be found neither in RP nor "London" pronunciation. It can sound somewhat similar to a general American r, but it does not have retroflexion. For the r of General RP, the tip of the tongue is held close to the rear part of the upper teeth ridge and the central part of the tongue is lowered. My own observations suggest that in the typical "Estuary" realization the tip of the tongue is lowered and the central part raised to a position close to, but not touching, the soft palate.

Vowel qualities in "Estuary English" are a compromise between unmodified regional forms and those of General RP. For example, vowels in final position in "Estuary English" such as the /i:/ in "me"

and the second /l/ in city, are longer than normally found in RP and may tend towards the quality of a diphthong.

The intonation of "Estuary English" is characterized by frequent prominence being given to prepositions and auxiliary verbs which are not normally stressed in General RP. This prominence is often marked to the extent that the nuclear tone (the syllable highlighted by pitch movement) can fall on prepositions. An example of this would be: "Let us get TO the point". There is a rise fall intonation which is characteristic of 'Estuary English' as is a greater use of question tags such as "isn't it?" and "don't I?" than in RP. The pitch of intonation patterns in "Estuary English" appears to be in a narrower frequency band than RP. In particular, rises often do not reach as high a pitch as they would in RP. The overall effect might be interpreted as one of deliberateness and even an apparent lack of enthusiasm.

The term "Estuary English" comprises some general changes which have hitherto received little attention. In what is perhaps the most famous work in this area: *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*, Professor Gimson suggested that Advanced RP "may well indicate the way in which the RP system is developing and be adopted in the future as General RP". He described Advanced RP forms as "mainly used by young people of exclusive social groups - mostly of the upper classes, but also for prestige value in certain professional circles". He continues by saying that in the most extreme variety Advanced RP "would usually be judged 'affected' by other RP speakers". An Advanced speaker might say something which sounded as follows: "So tarred darling; ar harred car's been in the mar for an ar." ("So tired darling; our hired car's been in the mire for an hour.") Whereas General RP has three vowel sounds in "hour", for example, Advanced would have one long /a:/. It could be argued that just as this group has long ceased to be the model for general imitation in clothes fashion, it has lost its role in linguistic trend setting. This observation aside, Professor Gimson's view of the role of advanced RP seems to have remained orthodoxy for over two decades.

Over these two decades, Professor Gimson's description of general RP as "typified by the pronunciation adopted by the BBC," even appears to have become debatable. More and more the General RP of the BBC has been under pressure from modified versions of RP, and perhaps now predominates only in enclaves in Radio 3 and possibly Radio 4, and of more importance internationally, in the World Service of the BBC. In addition to this, the children of parents who speak Advanced or General RP are likely to speak rather differently from their elders. This is truest of those in state schools, but it is also commonly found in public schools.

In the circles of those privileged young people who are likeliest to be influential in the future, the accepted pattern is very often set by the children of the upwardly mobile socially. For these groups the standard pronunciation is often "Estuary English". My contention is

that "Estuary English" describes the speech of a far larger and currently more linguistically influential group than "Advanced" RP speakers. The popularity of "Estuary English" among the young is significant for the future.

Speculation as to the reasons for the development and present growth of "Estuary English" is necessarily somewhat impressionist at this stage. Sociolinguistically it gives a middle ground between all types of RP on one side and regional varieties on the other. "Estuary English" speakers can cause their original accents to converge until they meet in the middle ground.

Because it obscures sociolinguistic origins, "Estuary English" is attractive to many. The motivation, often unconscious, of those who are rising and falling socio-economically is to fit into their new environments by compromising but not losing their original linguistic identity. Again, often unconsciously, those RP speakers who wish to hold on to what they have got are often aware that General RP is no longer perceived as a neutral accent in many circles. They are also aware that "Conservative" and more so "Advanced" RP can arouse hostility. What for many starts as an adaptation first to school and then working life, can lead to progressive adoption of "Estuary English" into private life as well. Complicated as this may sound to a foreign user of English, these developments may be seen as a linguistic reflection of the changes in class barriers in Britain.

It is interesting to speculate on the future of "Estuary English". In the long run it may influence the speech of all but the linguistically most isolated, among the highest and lowest socio-economic groups. Both could become linguistically conservative minorities. The highest may endeavour to retain their chosen variety of speech and the lowest their unmodified regional accents. The majority may be composed of speakers of "Estuary English" and those for whom it may form part of their pronunciation. The latter group might use certain features of "Estuary English" in combination with elements of whatever their regional speech might be.

For many, RP has long served to disguise origins. "Estuary English" may now be taking over this function. For large and influential sections of the young, the new model for general imitation may already be "Estuary English", which may become the RP of the future.

David Rosewarne originated the term *Estuary English* in a ground-breaking article published in 1984 in *The Times Educational Supplement* (London). The bulk of subsequent popularisation and academic discussion has drawn on the material in this article. David Rosewarne has lectured and broadcast extensively on Estuary English, both in Britain and overseas. Of the articles he has written, perhaps

two which appeared in *English Today* in 1994 are the richest in new observations.

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