

# A pronounced change in British speech

In George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, the phonetician Henry Higgins makes a famous boast about his ability to tell where people come from just by listening to their pronunciation:  
I can place any man within six miles.  
I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets.  
This is Shaw poking fun, of course. Accents don't usually change so dramatically over such short distances. However, not so long ago you could hear real-life Henry Higginses on radio shows, both in Britain and America. Members of the radio audience would speak out, and dialect experts would say which general part of the country they were from. They were quite good at it, too.

But it couldn't happen today. Anyone who claims nowadays to be able to tell where an English native speaker is from, just from the voice, is likely to end up looking foolish. Not because phoneticians are becoming less good at their job. It is simply that, in Britain at least, modern English accents are much less clear-cut than they were 50 years ago. People are more mobile now — especially as they follow the scent of jobs to the south of England, or seek retirement homes in rural areas — and their accents alter as they come into contact with new ways of speaking.

## RP old and new

Even Received Pronunciation (RP) has been affected. For half a century this accent has been held up before the world as a norm when teaching educated English. These days, of course, those who speak it abroad as a second or foreign language far outnumber the natives who use it at home. It's thought that only about 3% of the British population speak RP now — that's less than 2 million.

So what do the other educated millions speak? Many have a straightforward regional accent. But increasingly we find cases of 'modified RP' — a blend of RP with a regional accent. Usually this is the result of a regional speaker moving up-market; though it can just as easily be the result of an RP speaker moving 'down'.

Listen out for the glottal stop, in particular. This sound is famous for its use in Cockney English, where it replaces *t* in the middle of words like *bottle*, or at the end of words like *night*.

For some time now it has been creeping into educated speech — not yet in the middle of words, but very definitely at the end. It's common to hear people wish each other *good-night* with the final sound clipped off, and a glottal stop put in its place. And *right?* as a tag question is another widespread usage where you'll hear the final *t* dropped as often as not.

Then, as you travel away from London, towards Cambridgeshire, Berkshire, and beyond, listen out for the influence of the local dialects on the speech of the London commuters. Along the economically-booming Thames Valley, in particular, there are large populations of newcomers, many of whom are identifying with the local accent and letting it influence their speech — at least, in the pub if not in the office.

In Berkshire, for example, the use of an *r* sound after vowels, which is not pronounced in RP, is a typical feature of the local accent, as it is throughout much of the West Country. Local speakers make the tip of their tongue curl well back in words like *car* and *farm*. If you listen now to the stock-brokers and computer programmers in their pubs and clubs, you can hear a hint of this *r* colouring the sound of the preceding vowel on innumerable occasions. It is slowly becoming an informal standard.

You can even hear it on the radio — though there the *r* has a different source, and is used for different reasons. British disc jockeys who wish to sound trendy tend to drawl their speech and add an *r* sound after vowels, as they imitate American styles. Their accent has been called 'mid-Atlantic', for it is neither one thing nor the other. It sounds American to British listeners, but Americans hear it as British!

## Stress about stress

Of course, when pronunciation changes of this kind are used on formal occasions, they tend to be noticed, and criticised. On the radio, in particular, speakers who deviate from the expected RP norms regularly receive letters from irate listeners, and it's fairly common to see some of these published in the press. In fact, if you want to keep up to date with changes in pronunciation, one of the easiest ways of doing so is to keep an eye on the letter-columns of

*Radio Times* (BBC publications) and other media magazines.

A little while ago, I carried out a survey of all the letters about language that the BBC received over a six-week period, to see which topics were attracting most attention. The top pronunciation complaint was about the change in stress pattern that can be heard in such words as *research*, *dispute* (said especially by trade union leaders), *decade*, *integral*, *ordinarily*, and *controversy*. And certainly, this is one of the most important features of English linguistic change at present.

Of course, the phenomenon of stress shift in English isn't new. Different words have been affected in this way for over three hundred years. If I'd been around to carry out a survey in 1855, for example, we would have had comments such as this one, from the poet, Samuel Rogers:

The now fashionable pronunciation of several words is to me at least very offensive: *contemplate* is bad enough, but *balcony* makes me sick.

Previously, these words had been pronounced *contemplate* and *balcony* in standard English. But what was new and fashionable in Rogers' day is old and standard today. No one would ever dream of saying *balcony*. Instead, we fret over *controversy*, and such like.

In a few years time, the stress pattern will have changed yet again, and the words which upset people now will have settled down. People will look back at the 1980s, and wonder what the controversy over *controversy* was about. They will be arguing about other words that are currently quite stable. In the meantime, foreign users of English reared on a diet of traditional RP should remember the inevitability of language change, and be prepared to be surprised.

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