

# Hotel Babble On

The English language has become like a hotel lobby full of competing accents and dialects. Professor of Linguistics **David Crystal** says that is a Very Good Thing

**H**otels, dialects, and accents go together. You walk out of the door of a hotel in an English-speaking country and find yourself swimming in an auditory bath of local speech. Sometimes you find yourself trying to stay afloat, for there are more variations in English in the world today than there have ever been before, and some are so unfamiliar that you can struggle to understand them.

It's a consequence of English having become a world language – a global lingua franca. More than two billion people speak it now, and in every country in the world where English is used, local identities are expressed in local English. It was ever thus. When English arrived in the British Isles in the 5th century AD, the new settlers came from various parts of northern Europe, and brought with them different ways of speaking. And as their speech developed into the language that would one day be called English, these dialects multiplied. Today, you'll find differences in accent (pronunciation) and dialect (grammar and vocabulary) every 25 miles or so, as you travel around Britain. The differences can be even

I sat in a foyer...  
and made notes  
of the accents ...  
I reached 50  
in an hour



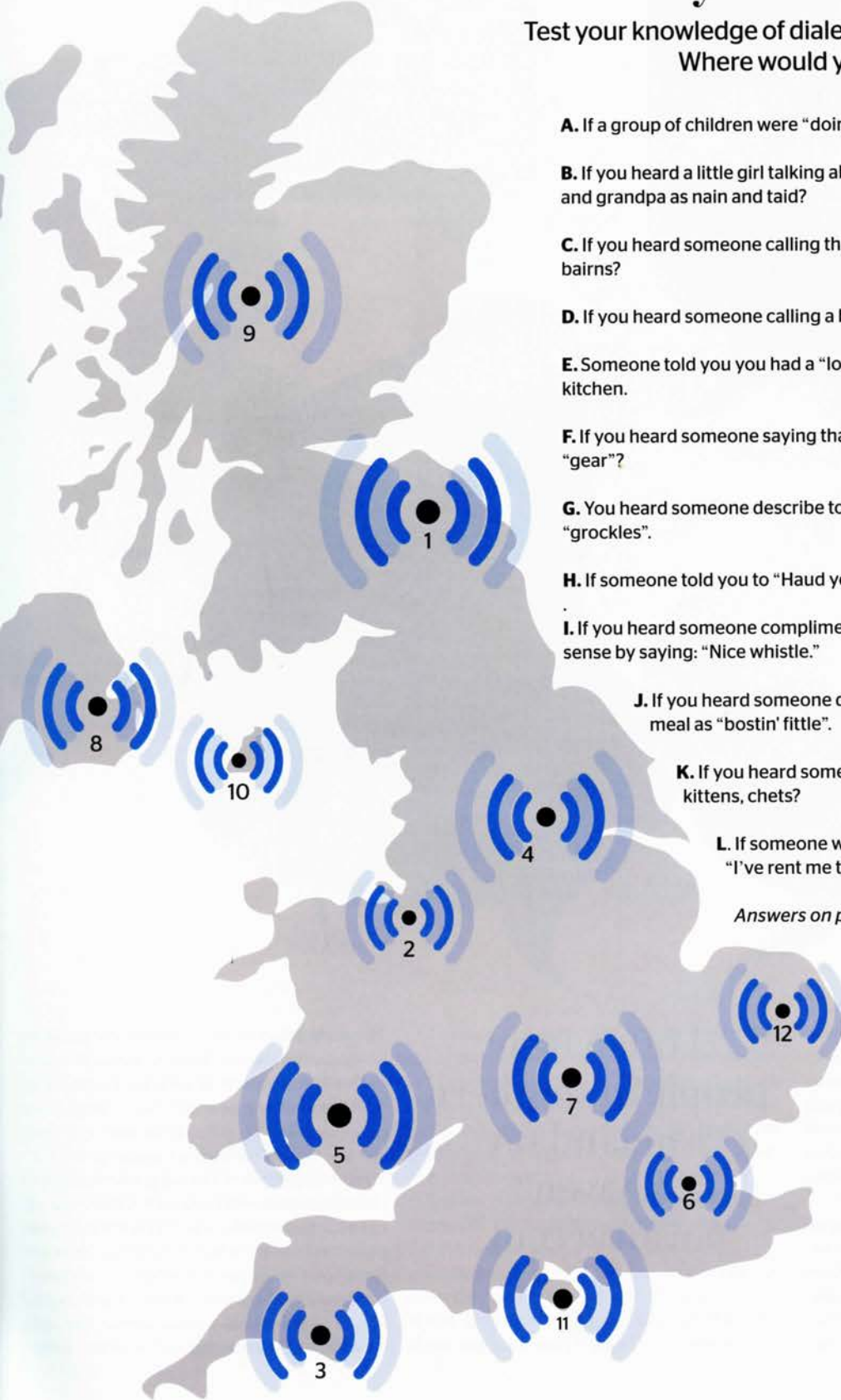
more noticeable in the cities. Stand in your hotel foyer, and listen to the Englishes spoken by those coming and going. You'll hear a huge variety.

Hotels by their nature are perfect places for doing dialect research. And what you hear will not only be visitors from the north, south, east, and west of Britain. You'll hear dialects expressing the local identities of people from all over the world – American, Canadian, Australian, Indian, Nigerian, Polish... I sat in a foyer once, near reception, and made notes of the accents I was hearing. I reached 50 in an hour – and there were probably more, as there were some I couldn't identify. (There were half-a-dozen behind the reception desk, too.)

Of course, these days you don't even need to leave your home to encounter linguistic diversity. All you have to do is access the internet, which has become an increasingly spoken medium over the past decade. Thanks to YouTube and all the other ways in which we can listen (as opposed to read) online, we have an opportunity today to hear the accents and dialects of the English-speaking world in a way that was never possible before. Some websites ►

# Do you know your whistle from your wheest?

Test your knowledge of dialects in our bostin' quiz  
Where would you be...



- A. If a group of children were "doing the beak".
- B. If you heard a little girl talking about her grandma and grandpa as nain and taid?
- C. If you heard someone calling their children bairns?
- D. If you heard someone calling a back alley a ginnel.
- E. Someone told you you had a "longtail" in your kitchen.
- F. If you heard someone saying that something was "gear"?
- G. You heard someone describe tourists as "grockles".
- H. If someone told you to "Haud yer wheest!"
- I. If you heard someone compliment a man's dress sense by saying: "Nice whistle."
- J. If you heard someone describing a good meal as "bostin' fittle".
- K. If you heard someone calling their kittens, chets?
- L. If someone with a rip shouted, "I've rent me trousers".



Answers on page 14

## THE ENGLISH VOCABULARY TEST

We love regional dialects so much here at DND that we've come up with some brilliant, descriptive and sometimes downright bonkers words we think should be adopted by the whole of the British Isles:

### Brozzen

*adjective* Hailing from the Yorkshire Dales, this term denotes a feeling of discomfort caused by consuming too much hearty fare.

Usage: "Ee, there's so much puddin' in me belly, I'm reet brozzen."

### Jitty

*noun* In Leicestershire, paths, alleyways, particularly between houses.

Usage: "Giz a croggy up the jitty, Kev." Croggy is "a lift on the back of someone's bike".

### Gopping

*adjective* A Manchester judgement, pronouncing something rather unattractive.

Usage: "Take that gopping mutt away before he turns me stomach to porridge."

**Dimpsy** *adjective* A Somerset term that describes the half-light usually at dusk.

Usage: "Well, Rosie, reckon the evening's dimpsy enough for a cheeky cider at The Three-legged Mare."

have made it their business to make these varieties available to anyone who's interested. An example is the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA), based at Kansas University, USA, which has as its ambition to collect examples of dialects from everywhere. They currently have more than 1,000 recordings from nearly 100 countries.

For me, this is the fascinating thing about English – the way it's become so diverse. People are sometimes surprised that there are so many accents and dialects in English, but it's an automatic reflection of the fact that the speakers are themselves so diverse.

I often hear  
people in southern  
England say  
"I haven't  
got an accent"



The variations tell other people where you're from, and there are no exceptions, because everyone has an accent and speaks a dialect.

This can come as a surprise. I often hear people in southern England say, "I haven't got an accent" or "I don't speak a dialect". What they're thinking of is the fact that, in England, the standard English way of speaking, and the associated "received pronunciation" (the traditional voice of the upper classes and the BBC) conveys no information about their geographical origin. But, of course, adopt a wider perspective, and it's obvious how limited a view this is. From

### **Tittermatotter**

*noun* The Norfolk word for a child's seesaw.  
Usage: "I've been up and down so many times today, I might as well be on a tittermatotter."

### **Nesh**

*adjective* A Nottinghamshire term meaning susceptible to the cold. Often used as a rebuke to "soft" southerners.  
Usage: "I say, it's a tad parky." "Nah, pet, you're a bit nesh is all."

### **Baffies**

*noun* Term used by the peoples of the east coast of Scotland for a pair of slippers.  
Usage: "Chuck them baffies over to me, hen, me feet are colder than a politician's heart."

### **Guddle**

*verb* Used in Northumberland and parts of Scotland to refer to a good old rummage.  
Usage: "Have a guddle in that drawer, Mary, and see if you can't find my truss."

### **Tranklements**

*noun* The way West Midlanders might describe ornaments or geegaws.  
Usage: "Her's got more tranklements on that mantelpiece than the British blummin' Museum."

the point of view of Scotland, Ireland, or Wales, they speak "the English of England". From the point of view of America, Australia, or anywhere else outside the British Isles, they speak "British English".

It's sometimes said that "accents and dialects are dying out". When people say this they're thinking of some of the old rural ways of speaking that have disappeared along with the traditional ways of life that they reflected. But these old varieties have now been replaced by new ones that have emerged as a consequence of two factors.

First, immense social mobility, both out

of London and towards London, which has brought accents and dialects into fresh contact with each other. The result is an amalgam – a new "combined" way of speaking, most noticeable in the "Estuary English" spoken in the London area, and spreading throughout commuterland.

Second, immense immigration – formerly from the British Commonwealth, with Caribbean, Indian, and West African ways of speaking in the forefront, but more recently from the countries of the European Union. While levels of fluency in English do vary, there are now many local communities in

Britain where second- or third-generation speakers are now natively fluent, speaking in an accent and dialect that is a mix of their new home base and their ethnic origin. Once there was just Scouse or Brummie or Geordie or Cockney...

Now there is "Chinese Scouse", "Jamaican Brummie", "Bangla Cockney", and as many combinations as there are people to combine. What's especially interesting is to see the way in which some of these new ways of speaking, reflecting a community's identity, are influencing people from outside those communities. "Innit" is a case in point, ►

made popular by British Asians in London, who were using it not literally in the sense of "isn't it?" but as a general tag asking for agreement or approval. "You're going on the Tube, innit." It wasn't the first time this expression had been heard in Britain. I've heard it in Wales as long as I can remember. But it's been picked up by a broad swathe of young people, whether they are immigrants or not.

The internet, of course, has been a major factor in promoting these new usages, especially in social media. The reason is the anonymity of the medium.

If you encounter a new usage in a face-to-face interaction, you'll decide whether to copy it based on your feelings of rapport with the person you're talking to. If you like that person, you'll pick it up. If you don't, you'll avoid it. And these feelings will also depend on such visible factors like age and gender.

But on the internet, you often can't see these things. All you see is a message in a forum or a chatroom, sent by someone whose e-name may bear no relation to the real-life identity of the sender.

All you have to go on is the language, so if you think a usage is cool, you'll use it. And because the internet has so many users, continually interacting, and because messages move so fast in cyberspace, usages which once

The controversial  
Urban Dictionary,  
now has almost  
eight million  
entries

would have taken months or years to circulate are now in everybody's in-tray within seconds. It's the size of the phenomenon that's so impressive. The online Urban Dictionary, to which anyone can contribute a new expression or definition, now has almost eight million entries. Thousands of new words or meanings are proposed every day, and millions of people visit, mainly under age 25.

The vast majority of the entries are idiosyncratic coinages that will have a very short shelf life, but some will survive and enter general usage. That's been the way since electronic communication began.

The abbreviation "LOL" (laugh out loud) – a way of expressing amusement or drawing attention to a jokey statement – arrived in the 1980s, and was originally used only by young people. But the demographic has altered. I know senior citizens who use it now. And in 2011 it was solemnly recorded in the latest revision of the Oxford English Dictionary.

And, as they say, "we ain't seen nothin' yet". The variety of dialects and accents in the UK is being more than matched by the proliferation of "new Englishes" as the language continues to develop its role as the world's No 1 lingua franca. English dialects have gone truly global now. When we walk out of our hotel and hear English spoken in a local way we could be – anywhere. 🐸

### Answers to Quiz

A=8 Belfast (It's playing truant)

B=5 Wales

C=1 Northeast or Scotland

D=4 Yorkshire or Lancashire

E=10 Isle of Man (it's a rat)

F=2 Liverpool area (means excellent)

G=11 Isle of Wight

H=9 Scotland (means shut up)

I=6 London (whistle & flute - suit)

J=7 Birmingham

K=3 Devon

L=12 Norfolk

## Readers competition

Father and son team Dan and David Crystal have written an authoritative, entertaining book about our accents and what they say about us.

We have 10 copies to give away. To be in with a chance of winning, please email [potato@bestwestern.co.uk](mailto:potato@bestwestern.co.uk) or write to:

DND Potato  
Cedar Communications  
85 Strand  
WC2R 0DW

For terms and conditions, please visit  
[www.bestwestern.co.uk/blog](http://www.bestwestern.co.uk/blog)

# YOU SAY POTATO

A BOOK ABOUT ACCENTS



BEN CRYSTAL & DAVID CRYSTAL