



## | David Crystal on language |

# A QUESTION OF ACCENT

Continua il nostro filo diretto con David Crystal, uno dei massimi esperti mondiali della lingua inglese. Questo mese il professore risponde all'annosa questione: come districarsi tra le varie pronunce? Come fare per allenarsi a capirle più o meno tutte, dal texano allo scozzese? BY DAVID CRYSTAL



People and their accents. Above: a little Irish girl. Right: a couple in the rural United States. Far right: a Scotsman in traditional dress.

**C1** ADVANCED



SPEAKER  
DAVID CRYSTAL



TRACK 15

The fact that English has developed so many new varieties around the world, let alone within Britain alone<sup>1</sup>, means that, as you travel around the English-speaking world, you are hearing all kinds of accents and dialects that you would never have experienced before. Now, this doesn't affect your learning to speak English one bit<sup>2</sup>: you will be taught a particular variety of English, it might be British Standard English with Received Pronunciation, or it might be American Standard English with a general American accent, or it might be an Australian Standard English, or whatever, it doesn't matter, the point is you will learn a particular variety of English to speak it, and your own accent will infiltrate this, of course. You will be noticeably Italian or Spanish or French in the way you speak, and there's nothing wrong with that, by the way, nothing wrong with that at all. This is all part of the diversity of accents that produced the English language. The fact that I might come from Yorkshire and speak with a Yorkshire accent,

or come from Wales and speak with a Welsh accent, or come from France and speak with a French accent, or Italy and speak with an Italian accent, this is fine, nothing wrong with that at all, but the point is that we learn one basic accent and one basic dialect, whatever it is.

### DISASTROUS

On the other hand, we're doing no service to our students if we let them go out into the big wide world with the impression that the only kind of accent and dialect they're going to encounter is the one they speak themselves because immediately they will encounter thousands now, thousands of different accents and dialects from all over the place<sup>3</sup>. This is going to cause them immense confusion, unless they're used to it, so it's a very important feature in English language teaching, I would say from the earliest possible moment, you know, Year One, Lesson One, while you're learning something quite basic like, you know, "That is a cat" or something of that kind, you're also exposed to some

accent variation in the nature of the speakers that you're listening to. The disaster is when the only English you hear is the English of your teacher, and that's all you get.

### ON LINE

Once upon a time<sup>4</sup> it would have been difficult to get exposure to any other accent: these days it's the easiest possible thing, thanks to the Internet. Virtually any regional accent of English around the world now is available on the Internet. And there are some specialist

### GLOSSARY

- let alone... alone:** per non parlare della sola Gran Bretagna, al suo interno
- this doesn't affect your learning... one bit:** questo non ha alcuna ripercussione sul vostro apprendimento dell'inglese parlato
- from all over the place:** da tutto il mondo
- once upon a time:** una volta
- demotic:** popolare
- inconceivable:** inconcepibile
- putting all their weight behind:** sostiene al massimo
- broad:** pesante, marcato
- weather forecasters:** gli annunciatori delle previsioni del tempo
- regret it:** lo rimpiangono
- a matter of taste:** una questione di gusti





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sites, like IDEA, I.D.E.A., the “International Dialects of English Archive,” where you can just log on and, suddenly in front of your ears, is hundreds and hundreds of different accents from all over the English-speaking world. There are several sites like this now, and so listening comprehension is a very different matter from speaking production, and the more you can expose people to a variety of accents and listening comprehension, the more confident they’re going to be when they encounter the realities of English.

### THE BBC

Now, the BBC has slowly come to reflect this kind of situation. I mean, once upon a time, the BBC, turn it on and the only accent you would hear would be English Received Pronunciation, up until about 1980. And then, over the next decade, there were small experiments, but it was still predominantly RP, and then things changed in the ‘90s and early 2000s, partly as a result of the development of local radio stations, which were speaking in their local accents, and attracting audience away from the BBC. The BBC realised that they needed to

become more demotic<sup>5</sup>, so much so then that by 2005 there was this amazing *Voices* project on the BBC, which was a celebration of all the accents and dialects of the British Isles – inconceivable<sup>6</sup> 20 years ago, but now the BBC putting all their weight behind<sup>7</sup> accent variation and dialect variation. And this is now reflected in the accents that you hear when you turn on the BBC any day of the week. You will hear all kinds of accents now, nothing very broad<sup>8</sup>, of course – you have to be intelligible – but you will hear Susan Rae, for example, speaking in a lovely Scottish accent, reading the news on Radio Four, you’ll hear Huw Edwards with his South Wales accent, reading the news on television at 10 o’clock at night, and so on, weather forecasters<sup>9</sup> with all kinds of regional accents in their background, as well as RP, of course, still a number of people presenting the traditional English accent at the same time. So it’s diversity that you hear on the BBC these days.

### HER MAJESTY

And the second thing people ought to realise is that, in any case, the accent of the BBC, even in Received Pronunciation,

has changed over the past 20, 30 years. Accents never stand still, accents always change, language always changes. So the RP that people used to hear 20, 30 years ago, and certainly 40, 50 years ago, is very different from the RP that you hear these days. The old accent sounds archaic. I mean, you hear it even in the speech of Her Majesty the Queen: if you listen to the way she talks when she gives her speech from the throne back in 1953 and 1954, and listen to her speech these days, you’ll notice differences. In those days RP speakers would say the word “cup” (C-U-P) (*imitates the accent*) “cap” with an “a” sound “like that.” And now it’s more “cup” with an “u” sound, “cap, cup.” I mean, there’s a noticeable difference there, or a word like “man” 40, 50 years ago would have been “men, men,” almost an “e” sound, and today it’s more “man, man, man” with an “a” sound. There are lots of differences like that, which means that RP and the voice of the BBC is not the same as it once was: some people regret it<sup>10</sup>, some people enjoy it, this is a matter of taste<sup>11</sup>. ☹

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