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# *Theory and Other Dangerous Things*

# Estuary English and Received Pronunciation: Wot's the Difference?

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**Abstract:** Recently, there has been a trend aiming at teaching Global Englishes to English as a second or foreign language learners. In this sense, when teaching British English, instead of teaching Received Pronunciation (RP), which has been the standard, there has been a movement to examine Estuary English as a new standard for ESL education, which is widely used by athletes, the media, and youth who live in and around London (Wells, 1997). This paper will examine the difference between Estuary English and RP phonetically, syntactically and pragmatically and report on results of Estuary English exposure to ESL students in Singapore (Chia & Brown, 2002; Deterding, 2005) and Sweden (Blackmore, 2010). Conclusions show that although Estuary English is difficult to comprehend and is not as appealing to ESL students as RP, exposing second language learners to this variety of British English is valuable because they will encounter it much more than RP if they travel to or around southern England.

## Received Pronunciation

British Received Pronunciation<sup>1</sup> (RP) is a British accent that until recently has been associated with wealth, power and education. It has been considered non-regional and desirable and has set the standard for pronunciation (Parsons, 1998). RP has been the accepted standard for English since it was used around the world during the reign of the British Empire (Crystal, 2010). Recently, however, the 'posh' accent of RP has been taken over by a need to feel more down to earth and ordinary as seen by the increase in diversity of accents used on the BBC (Crystal, 2010). As one of these local accents, Estuary English (EE) has begun to replace RP as the standard accent of England. Estuary English has been suggested as the 'new RP' (Rosewarne, 1984) and is being spoken by athletes, the media and even members of the royal family (Rosewarne, 2009; Wells, 1997). It is also being used abroad in English as a second language environments (Deterding, 2005; Chia & Brown, 2002; Blackmore, 2010). Will it eventually overcome RP as the new standardised accent for English education or is it just another accent that will eventually disappear? This paper, in addition to

discussing the future of Estuary English in the world as a standard for English as a foreign (second) language, will examine the pragmatic, phonological, and syntactic differences between these variations of English.

## Estuary English

What is Estuary English<sup>2</sup>? In 1984, David Rosewarne coined the term 'Estuary English' for the variety of English that was being spoken in London and the Southeast of England in areas around the Thames River. He characterised it as "a variety of modified regional speech. It is a mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation" (Rosewarne, 1994, p. 3). It is regarded as a mix of RP and Cockney. While some aspects of RP are retained, some Cockney traits have been adopted. This has created a new variety of Standard English known as EE. There is much controversy over whether EE is actually a regiolect, dialect, accent or style (Bonness, 2011; Ryfa, 2003). Whether it even exists has also been debated (Trudgill, 2002), but it is heavily discussed in research around the globe so its existence is well substantiated. There is also much debate over the phonetic characteristics of EE. This paper will focus on some of the characteristics suggested by John Wells (1994) including l-vocalisation, glottalling, and yod-coalescence.

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## Where are RP and EE Used?

Received Pronunciation (RP) is a non-regional accent that has held the highest status among the dialects used in the UK (Trudgill, 2002). Surprisingly, while only three per cent of the British population speaks RP (Trudgill, 2002), it has been used as a reference pronunciation for English education around the world. RP, or at least a close approximation of it, is widely used in many countries due to the spread of the British Empire beginning in the 15th century. Many of these countries, including Australia, have rejected it in favour of more home-style accents (Burrige & Mulder, 1998). In Britain, it is used mainly by royalty, judicial officers and the media although since 2005, the BBC has incorporated more regional accents into their programming (Crystal, 2010).

Estuary English demographically originates in the southeast regions around London. According to Rosewarne, it has been spoken in the House of Commons, government, the media and medical and teaching professions in the southeast (Rosewarne, 1984, as cited in Wells, 1997). EE has spread around England to areas towards Yorkshire and Devon (Crystal, 2010) and Northampton (Bonness, 2011). It has also been used in foreign language environments in Singapore (Chia & Brown, 2002; Deterding, 2005) and in Sweden (Blackmore, 2010).

## Differences in How They Sound

Estuary English has many phonetic characteristics different from RP (Wells, 1994). They include l-vocalization in which the dark /ɪ/ sound—like the sound at the end of the word ‘fill’—which is usually followed by a consonant or a pause, is replaced with the /o/ sound resulting in a sound like ‘fiw.’ Glottalling is also a major characteristic of EE. The glottal stop /ʔ/ replaces the /t/ sound when it is at the end of a word or before a consonant. For example, ‘take it off’ sounds like ‘take i’ off’ (Wells, 1994). However, EE speakers do not replace the /t/ sound before a vowel as in ‘water’ (Crystal, 1995; Kerswill, 2001). Use of a glottal stop in this instance is recognised as a Cockney feature. Yod coalescence, in which the voiceless /tj/ sound in RP is replaced with a /tʃ/. In EE, ‘Estuary English’ sounds like ‘Esjuary English.’ In addition, ‘Tuesday’ sounds like ‘chooseday’ and ‘reduce’ becomes ‘rejuice’ as the voiced /dj/ in RP becomes /dʒ/ in EE.

Table 1, adapted from a handout that John Wells (1994) used in a talk in Heidelberg, explains these differences clearly.

One Cockney characteristic, th-fronting, in which the ‘th’ sound is replaced by an ‘f’ sound—for example, ‘bath’ becomes ‘baf’—is used by some younger southeasterners and has begun to be adopted by many EE speakers (Chia & Brown, 2002). Although some

Table 1

### *Phonetic Differences between Estuary English and Received Pronunciation*

Phonetic Characteristic <sup>3</sup>	Sample Word	EE Pronunciation	RP Pronunciation
EE [aɪ] = RP [aɪ]	PRICE	[praɪs]	[praɪs]
EE [æʊ] = RP [aʊ]	MOUTH	[mæʊθ]	[maʊθ]
EE [o] = RP /ɪ/	MILK	[mɪok]	[mɪlk]
	MIDDLE	[mɪdo]	[mɪdl]
EE /ʔ/ = RP /t/	FOOTBALL	[fʊʔbao]	[fʊtbal]
	BELT	[beoʔ]	[belt]
EE [tʃ] = RP [tj]	TUESDAY	[tʃuzdeɪ]	[tjuzdeɪ]
EE [dʒ] = RP [dj]	REDUCE	[rɪdʒʊs]	[rɪdjʊs]

Note. Adapted from Wells, J. C. (1994). Transcribing Estuary English: A Discussion Document. *Speech Hearing and Language*:

*UCL Work in Progress*, 8, 259–267. Retrieved from <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary/transcree.pdf>

authors classify this as an exclusively Cockney feature (Mompean, 2007; Wells, 1997), others suggest that it has become a prominent feature of EE (Coggle 1998-1999; Przedlacka, 2002; Ryfa, 2003).

A diphthong shift, as explained in Table 2, has also been classified as an Estuary English feature. While this shift never occurs in RP it is very strong in Cockney, and in EE, it is used in a weaker form (Ryfa, 2003; Wells, 1994).

Table 2

*Diphthong Shifts in Estuary English*

Sample word	RP diphthong	EE diphthong
FACE	[eɪ]	[aɪ]
PRICE	[aɪ]	[aɪ]
GOAT	[əʊ]	[ʌʊ]

A phonemic feature known as the GOAT allophony has also been recognised as an EE feature. Before a /t/ or its reflex /o/, there is a phonemic split resulting in the [əʊ] sound in [gəʊt] becoming [gʊʊt]. Other examples such as row [rʌʊ] and roll [rʊʊ] have been noted (Maidment, 1994).

There are also many lexical features specific to EE as suggested by Wells (1994). The participle or gerund -ing ending can be pronounced [ɪn] or [ɪŋ]. The suffix -thing is pronounced [θɪŋk] and not [θɪŋ]. In EE, the /n/ sound replaces the standard RP /nt/ in words like ‘twenty’ [twɛni] and ‘plenty’ [plɛni]. For words such as ‘want’ and ‘went’, when they precede a vowel, they are often reduced to [wɒnɪd] (wanted) and [wɛnæʊ?] (went out). Other words with the -nt combination, such as ‘winter’, [wɪntə] are not usually reduced. In RP, where a /n/ is usually used as in ‘station’ [steɪʃn], in EE, this becomes [steɪʃən] with an [ən] sound at the end of the word.

**Differences in How They Are Used**

As David Crystal (1995) suggests, there are many pragmatic differences between EE and RP. Tag questions in RP tend to be used for confirmation of the statement. For example, “It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” In EE however, question tags tend to be confrontational: “I

said I was going, didn’t I.” Negative forms of verbs are used differently as well. In RP, one would say, “I have never done it. No, I haven’t” whereas the EE speaker would say, “I never did. No, I never.” However, because the double negative is a distinctive Cockney feature, Crystal (1995, p. 194) suggests the double negative form is often not used because of its uneducated connotations.

The adverbial ending -ly is often omitted in EE: “You’re turning it too slow” or “They are talking very quiet.” In RP of course, these endings are never omitted. There is also a generalization of the singular third person and the past tense of was. Compared to the RP, “So I got out of the car...,” the EE speaker would say, “So I gets out of the car...” Speakers of RP would say, “We were walking down the road” whereas in EE, “We was walking down the road...” is standard. EE speakers also tend to stress the prepositions in sentences such as the following. “I looked out the window” or “I got off of the bench.” (Crystal, 1995 p. 327). David Rosewarne (1994) suggests this stress pattern often causes communication problems. Take the sentence, “This bank has been around for years.” With an RP stress pattern on the word years, the meaning is clear. With the EE stress on the word for, as in “This bank has been around for years,” the listener may interpret for as four causing some confusion.

Traditional British words are often used in a different context in Estuary English. “Cheers” is used not only as a greeting, but also as a way to say thank you or goodbye. The word ‘mate’ is used more often than in RP. The use of the word ‘basically’ has been extended and used as a gap-filler. The vocabulary of EE has also adopted many Americanisms as suggested by both Rosewarne (1994) and Ryfa (2003). In RP, speakers would say, “Here you are,” whereas in EE, they say, “There you go.” Instead of the RP “The phone is engaged,” EE speakers say, “The phone is busy.” The RP speaker would say “correct” but the EE speaker is “right.” These are just a few examples of the

way that EE is becoming more American than its counterpart.

### **The Future of EE as a Standard**

While Estuary English is quite popular among the English, what about the prospect of it becoming the variety of Standard English that can be taught around the world to replace RP as Rosewarne (1994) suggests? As Rosewarne (2009) and Crystal (2010) state, EE is spreading rapidly, more people in England are using EE than RP, and EE is being used more and more in British business environments (Scott, 1995), wouldn't it be reasonable to teach that as the new British standard? Trudgill (2002) suggests that teaching 24-year-old ESL learners to sound like 24-year-old English youth makes more sense than teaching them to sound like 94-year-old aristocrats. The use of RP as the standard of TEFL has been questioned "because of its many homophones and the neutralisation of unstressed vowels" (Parsons, 1998, p. 77), and due to feelings of hostility because of its upper-class origins (Mompean, 2007). In addition, as of March 2013, the TOEFL Internet Based Test has incorporated other native-speaker accents into the listening assessment (Educational Testing Service, 2013). Accents from Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom are now being used in addition to the traditional North American accent. Exposure to these kinds of accents, including EE, is important in order for the students to be able to prepare for the TOEFL test and for situations in which they may encounter these native accents while studying or traveling abroad.

The question is whether EE is acceptable as a new standard to teach. Rosewarne (1996) has suggested that some of the phonological features of EE are similar to typical pronunciation features of non-native speakers. However, as Parsons (1998) suggests, an important factor of any standard of English is intelligibility. If the standard of English is not understood by second or foreign language learners, then it may not be appropriate for foreign language teaching environments. Studies have been done in Singapore to test EE and its acceptance as the new standard of English education (Chia & Brown, 2002;

Deterding, 2005). Other studies have examined students' attitudes towards varieties of English including EE (Blackmore, 2010).

### **Estuary English in ESL/EFL Environments**

In the Chia and Brown study (2002), RP, EE and Singapore English were compared to determine which variety was the most appealing for seventeen undergraduate students in a phonetics course at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. Students were asked to listen to a 1 minute 30 second long recording by six speakers: two RP, two EE and two Singapore English. The students were asked to rank the speakers qualitatively on various characteristics included under three broad categories of competence, personal integrity and social attractiveness. RP was ranked the highest in terms of sounding refined and educated, intelligibility and appropriateness. EE on the other hand, ranked the lowest for these factors but ranked highly in friendliness, interest and sincerity. The native Singapore English ranked between RP and EE. For these students, EE was not as appealing as RP for the standard of English they wish to speak.

In another study, also at the National Institute of Education in Singapore, in part one, six Chinese undergraduate college students were asked to orthographically transcribe interviews by RP and EE speakers (Deterding, 2005). All the students were able to correctly transcribe the speech of the RP speaker with the exception of a few place names. In the transcription of the EE speech however, as well as incorrectly transcribing place names, many other difficulties were seen. Specifically, the medial glottal stops in 'Nottingham City' were transcribed as 'not limousine' by one student and 'that you'll never see' by another. Many students couldn't transcribe that part of the speech at all. Other features, such as the EE tendency to pronounce 'good' as [gid] and 'looked' as [lɪkt], also caused problems and suggest that EE is less intelligible than RP.

In the second part of the study, 12 undergraduate students of Chinese, Indian or Malay decent were asked to listen to 40-second extracts of speeches in EE and

orthographically transcribe the speech. One student transcribed 'three nights' as 'free nights' indicating the difficulty in understanding the EE speaker with Cockney traits. When the students were asked what they thought of EE, they suggested that it sounded lazy as if the speaker wasn't making a conscious effort to pronounce his words properly. Another student said that the speaker seemed to be slurring. These comments reflect that EE is not appealing as a Standard English to be learned by non-native speakers. The author of this study does suggest that exposing non-native students to varieties such as EE is invaluable as there are very few native speakers of English who actually sound like those in the textbooks (Deterding, 2005). Mompean (2007) supports this claim saying that EFL students may have difficulty understanding native speakers unless they are exposed to many varieties of English.

In contrast, in a study done to determine Swedish students' attitudes towards three varieties of English (Australian English, Estuary English and Northern England English), three classes of upper secondary students (approximately 70 students) were asked to listen to recordings of four native-English speakers (speaking Melbourne Australian, EE, Northern England, Brisbane Australian) reading excerpts from Harry Potter (Blackmore, 2010). Results showed that the students thought that the Estuary English accent was the most pleasant to listen to and had the most authority. These results mirror the attitudes of the research subjects in the Chia and Brown study suggesting that Estuary English is a friendly form of English. However, both the Chia and Brown and Deterding studies suggest that EE is not as intelligible as RP. Parsons (1998) suggests that intelligibility is based upon the amount of exposure. Because RP has been the standard of English as a second language in Singapore for many years, it was more easily understood by the research subjects. In the future, increasing ESL students' exposure to EE should result in more intelligibility.

## Conclusion

Overall, due to its lexical, phonological and discursual differences, EE appears to be a different variety of English than RP. Many people in England speak EE and it is rapidly spreading throughout the country. It is also expanding to other countries through tourists and language teachers. Although it has been shown as difficult for ESL students to comprehend, this may be due to a lack of exposure. As ESL students around the globe are exposed to EE by speaking with native speakers and in language testing, they will become used to it and their understanding of its phonetic nuances will increase. Although EE has phonetic and grammatical differences that may hinder its promotion to a standard that should be taught, it is an interesting, valuable variety of English that is retaining popularity and growing. As further research is done, it will be interesting to see how far the EE phenomenon goes and whether it will become a lingua franca for ESL or EFL students.

## Notes

1. An example of Estuary English can be heard at <http://www.lowlands-l.net/anniversary/estuary.php>
2. An example of RP (General British English) can be heard at <http://www.lowlands-l.net/anniversary/english-england.php>
3. All phonetic symbols are from the International Phonetic Alphabet. For examples, please refer to <http://www.antimoon.com/how/pronunc-soundsipa.htm>.

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