

**THE NATURE OF THE PRONUNCIATION STANDARD -  
ESTUARY ENGLISH**

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*The nature of Estuary English is investigated in this paper. The description of phonemic variety of this pronunciation standard is analyzed. The Popularity of the Pronunciation Standard is given.*

**Key words:** *phonemic variety, Estuary English, pronunciation standard, Received Pronunciation.*

The nature of Received Pronunciation (RP) is not the same at different stages of its historical development and it may be characterised by certain phonological peculiarities at definite moments of its evolution. In the early 1990s a number of newspapers began running articles about changing accents and changing attitudes towards accents: Estuary English (EE), Mockney, Occupational English have all been used to describe new accent variations which are different to RP. The first of these new variants, and by far the most prolific of these, is EE, which by the late 90s has been accepted by most linguists as a real variant. So EE has been in the focus of research of some prominent modern phoneticians and leading linguistic schools of today's world. And that is why it is very important today to teach at the English lessons not just RP pronunciation, but accent variations as well.

**The importance** of the present Research is underlined by the necessity of the complex and profound investigation of the recent dynamic processes taking place in the pronunciation standard generalised as "EE".

**The aim** of the research is to describe the general nature of EE as the super modern accent of British pronunciation and to classify the phonetically relevant shifts in its dynamic nature.

To reach the present aim we have to solve the following *tasks*:

- 1) to generalise the common features of EE as modern pronunciation standard;
- 2) to trace out the most typical phonological features of the given accent;
- 3) to select the features, which are essential for the existence of the accent;
- 4) to compare the following features with the pronunciation standard;
- 5) to systematise the obtained results according to the practical value and theoretical significance;
- 6) to provide a well-grounded linguistic interpretation of the main results;
- 7) to conclude the general outcome of the research in the terms of the linguistic signs.

**The object** of the present paper is the innovative phonetic phenomena introduced into modern pronunciation standard.

The subject of the research is the phonological features relevant for the realisation of the innovative phonetic phenomena in speech continuum.

**The practical value** of this work may be determined by the possibility to use the main proceedings of the research in practical course of phonetics of the English language, as it deals with the up-to-date pronunciation standard and reflex the most real pronunciation situation.

**The theoretical significance** of the research can be specified in close unity with the practical value. In particular, it is important in theoretical view, as its major results considerably benefit the theoretical database of the English pronunciation norm, particularly the phonological nature of the current innovative phonetic units.

A great deal of works dedicated to EE was done by David Rosewarne, who coined the term "Estuary English" in 1984; by Paul Coggle, who published his popular paperback "Do You Speak Estuary"; by Neal Ascherson, who claimed that the upper-class young now speak EE, "the faintly Cocknefied accent of the south-east". Gillian Shephard, vice versa, called EE as "slovenly, mumbling, bastardised Cockney" and she claimed that teachers had

a duty to do their utmost to eradicate it. Anyway, EE, named after the banks of the Thames and its estuary, is to be heard in the House of Commons, the City, the Civil Service, local government, the media, advertising and the medical and teaching professions in the south-east. What is more, in recent years it began to be heard around three other estuaries- the Humber in the north-east, the Dee- in the north-west and the Severn- in the West-because of the relatively easy rail and motorway commuting networks.

The origins of Estuary English (EE) are numerous and one can do no more than guess which of the many possible sources was most influential. There is a view that it has developed out of a combination of geographic and social factors. The geographic causes of Estuary English have to do with movements of population. Since World War II large numbers of Londoners have, for various reasons, moved out of the capital. Many took the opportunity of being rehoused when overspill building programmes were carried out after the war. Cockney speakers, particularly Eastenders, were uprooted and transplanted in large numbers to Greenfield sites, mainly in the Home Counties, but sometimes as far away as Suffolk. Others left London when they retired and realized the dream of a lifetime by purchasing a bungalow by the seaside. The Sussex coast was favoured, but Kent and East Anglia also took their share of London's elderly. Both these groups of "emigrants" carried on speaking their London dialect in their newly adopted territories and were sufficiently numerous to provide the strong London presents all over the south east of England. This factor added to the already strong influence of the capital on the surrounding areas, meant that the accents of the Home Counties came under attack from London and have in many cases been replaced by Estuary English, at least among the young people of these areas. Indeed, one of the reasons why the accents of the Home Counties are falling to the onslaught of Estuary English is because young people in particular for social reasons, positively cultivate it. In brief, Estuary English provides an urban rather than a rural image of the speaker, and is therefore high on 'street cred'.

Another socially determined factor in the development of Estuary English works from both ends of the social spectrum. On the one hand there are many Londoners who feel the need to modify their Cockney speech, either to assist them to fit into a new geographic environment or to promote their social mobility. On the other hand there are speakers at the RP end of the spectrum who recognize that 'talking posh' identifies them with the Establishment and the wielders of power, and is therefore to be avoided in the interests of being regarded as 'one of us' rather than 'one of them'. Good examples of the latter category are Ben Elton and Nigel Kennedy. Both were born into middle-class homes in south-east England (Ben Elton's father was an immigrant from Central Europe and a university teacher, his mother from the North West) yet both are well/Into the Estuary English part of the spectrum. This movement from both ends of the spectrum towards the middle ground means the discarding of some of the features of Cockney by one group and the acquiring of some of these features by the other group [1, . 34-36] .

It seems that Estuary English spreads outwards until it reaches either a coastal boundary or another major dialect hurdle. So it extends to the north-east of London as far as the north Norfolk coast, to the south-west of London as far as the Dorset coast, and to the south-east of London to the south Kent coast. To the north and north-west of London, beyond the northern boundaries of Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire, Estuary English begins to encounter the so-called 'bath and love boundary'; that is, the imaginary lines across the country, roughly from the Wash to the Welsh border with Hereford and Worcester, north of which people pronounce words like bath and laugh with a short/a/(as in lass) and words like love and cup with a short /u /(as in bush). With such a sturdy barrier as this to contend with, Estuary English fares only slightly better than it does at the geographic boundaries with the sea. That is not to say that the influence of Estuary English will never progress further north: in fact, there is some evidence to suggest that young people further north are adopting some of the features of Estuary English. It is simply that, at present, Estuary English speakers are not the norm in cities such as Birmingham, Derby and Leicester, though it is relatively common to find them in less competitive urban

environments such as Norwich and Southampton. Although the dialect boundaries to the west of London are less formidable than those to the north, it would not yet be true to claim that Estuary English has claimed cities like Bristol. Here, and further to the south-west, in Exeter and Plymouth, the distinctive pronunciation of /r/ after a vowel (as in *car*, *warm*, *further*) – the ‘postvocalic r’, as it is called – can still be heard, at least among older and working-class speakers. It remains to be seen how long even this relatively hardy feature will withstand the onslaught from Estuary English. Already former strongholds of postvocalic /r/, such as Winchester, Southampton (as previously mentioned) and Bournemouth, have more or less fallen, leaving only the older inhabitants to pronounce the /r/. This is probably because young people perceive the pronunciation of /r/ as typical of rural speakers, a view reinforced by television advertisements for such products as butter and cider. Actors only need to put on smocks and pronounce ‘butter’ as *budderr* or ‘cider’ as *ziderr* to suggest a wholesome and natural product of the British countryside. Is it then any wonder that the pronunciation of /f/ is increasingly shunned by the young? It is probably only a matter of time before this tendency extends to the whole of the West Country [2, p. 57-62].

So what exactly is Estuary English? We have already seen that it is to be found somewhere on a continuum between RP and Cockney. But what does this mean in practical terms? In this section we shall look briefly at a few of the more significant features that help to clarify matters. Bear in mind that Estuary English speech contains characteristics of both RP and Cockney, in varying degrees. So it is necessary to ‘take a look at both these forms of English in order to be able to identify Estuary English speakers.’ [3, p. 17]

Just as upper-class English evokes in many people’s minds an image of Hooray Henry’s and Henriettas, chinless wonders, Land Rovers, green wellies and – in the case of the women – Jacqmar scarves and velvet headbands, so Estuary English evokes a similarly stereotypical image of shell suits, beer bellies, Ford Escorts, chunky gold chains, flats in Marbella (at least for those at the dodgy dealings end of the spectrum) and – again in the case of the women – white high-heeled shoes preferably worn with no tights.

The stereotypes are the living reminders of Britain’s continuing class system. They are there to enable members of British society to go on disdaining each other in the age-old manner. The stereotypes are perpetuated and intensified by the media – in advertisements, soaps and even in serious drama. But the stereotypes are just that. There may be some element of truth in them – it is admittedly not difficult to spot individuals who live up (or down) to the images outlined above – but anyone who makes generalised assumptions based on these stereotypes is in for a rude shock.

The stereotype assumes that Estuary English marks its speakers as members of the lower strata of British society. In fact Estuary English is now spoken across a very wide social spectrum, and, contrary to popular belief, there are among Estuary English speakers growing numbers of professional people, many of them academically educated and highly qualified [4, p. 28-30].

Given the social prestige allegedly enjoyed by RP, it might seem appropriate to assume that the more highly esteemed a profession is the more likely its members are to be RP speakers. If we take medical consultants and surgeons as an example, we do indeed find that the general expectation is for them to be RP speakers. In fact, if you listen to television interviews with surgeons at the forefront of modern medicine, you will find that RP accents no longer dominate even in this traditionally rather conservative profession. Foreign and Scottish accents are often in evidence, but regional English accents are also to be heard. Among these, Estuary English is certainly well represented, even if the speakers tend to be closer to RP than to the Cockney end of the spectrum.

University teachers, too, are stereotypically seen as RP speakers, male, middle-class and middle-aged. In many respects the stereotype is not far from reality in the ‘old’ universities (Oxbridge, Redbrick and those institutions established in the sixties). In these establishments, the number of women professors is still lamentably small, the average age of academic staff is somewhere around 50 and, although some academics have working-class backgrounds, the majority originate from upper middle-class families. In the ‘new’

universities, the ex-polytechnics, the reality is admittedly considerably different from the stereotype. Despite the conservative character of the 'old' universities, it is by no means difficult to identify significant numbers of Estuary English speakers amongst academic staff. Intuition would suggest that these speakers tend to be found in the Social Sciences and Natural Sciences subjects rather than in the Humanities, but even this is a generalization that has its notable exceptions.

Nor is it only in the more junior posts that Estuary English-speaking academics are to be found. They are in evidence right across the academic career structure and include professors, deans and even vice chancellors. As in all professions, some academics lean towards the Cockney end and others towards the RP end of the Estuary English spectrum. Cockney-end-of-the-spectrum colleagues assert in a planning meeting:

Uhv cauws, the cumpyew'uh wiuw heuwp t'souwv tha' difficu'w'y.  
(Of course, the computer will help to solve that difficulty.)

The days when practically all English Oxford English are well and truly gone. The image of certain other professions, such as nursing and – in particular – the police force, because they admit significant proportions of working-class recruits, is not so RP-oriented. In fact, the stereotypical police sergeant is more likely to speak Estuary English than RP. In practice it is difficult, if not impossible, to find any profession in which Estuary English speakers are not represented. When faced with the evidence, the stereotype of the Estuary English speaker as working-class, common and uneducated begins to look distinctly questionable. [5, . 12; 6, . 13]

If the professional world does not provide sufficient evidence to destroy the stereotype, we may turn to a world that is familiar and accessible to everyone, the world of television and radio. Of course, we expect certain kinds of media stars to be firmly in the Estuary camp, perhaps even at the Cockney end of the spectrum. Comedians and boxers seem to fall into this category and, if we direct our attention to a popular boxer like Frank Bruno, our expectations are confirmed. He is readily identifiable as a Cockney speaker. In this utterance taken from Clive Anderson Talks Back, Bruno reveals his Cockney allegiances:

lorn fur'ee a' this snownen' ... louw be si'in' in rnuh rockin' chair wiv rnuh gran'children, shaowin urn auw rnuh cah'in's ah'ov the piper. (I'm thirty at this moment... I'll be sitting in my rocking chair with my grandchildren, showing them all my cuttings out of the paper.) Most of the features we have already looked at as being of Cockney origin are present here, and a few more beside. But, even among boxers living in the south-east, we are not entirely safe in our preconceptions. Have you ever listened to Chris Eubank's accent? On the phone he could easily pass for a bank manager – though having said that, there are, of course, plenty of Estuary-speaking bank managers, too! [7, . 118-120].

Admittedly there are not many television news readers in the Estuary camp. Newsreaders have to carry authority. At the moment RP is the most authoritative vehicle for news reading. People are not yet ready for:

British raluw wiuw be cu'ng the cost of traveuw to Paris through the Channeuw Tunneuw. (British Rail will be cutting the cost of travel to Paris through the Channel Tunnel.) But innovations have taken place even in this sphere over a couple of decades. It was initially considered unsuitable for women to read the news, either on radio or on television, since it was felt that their mode of speech lacked authority. It was also feared that black news readers might offend the more 'sensitive' viewer. Nowadays some of the best news readers are women or black or both, and the authority of news reading has not been undermined. But the final bastion, that of accent, still has not been breached as far as 'serious' news (BBC and ITV main newscasts) goes.

Things are different in radio, where only a few stations (notably Radio 4) provide serious news cover. On most of the commercial and local radio stations anything goes as far as accent is concerned. An Estuary accent is certainly no barrier here. In fact there is hardly an RP accent to be heard. Classic FM, a serious but popularist and supposedly non-elitist station, has gone as far as using an Australian newsreader whose accent is 'educated anti-podean'. Australian English and Estuary English do have certain similarities, but the

modified vowels of the educated Australian seem to be preferred to the 'common'-sounding vowels of Estuary when it comes to serious news reading! [8, . 26].

But news reading is the exception that proves the rule as far as TV and radio are concerned. A wide range of regional accents can be heard, and among them a good proportion of Estuary speakers. This is also the case when it comes to advertising. First thoughts might suggest that RP voices would be most successful at promoting products, since the authority and credibility of the speaker are of paramount importance in persuading people to spend their money. And if an RP accent provides authority for the news, then it will do the same for commercial products, won't It? Well, it seems that this is not necessarily so. The commercial world is quick to sort out what works best, and if that were an RP accent in every case the advertising agencies would be using only RP speakers. But they are not: on the contrary, there is a substantial demand for Estuary speakers.

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