Eʃtuary English: Is English going Cockney?

Ulrike Altendorf
Heinrich-Heine-Universität
Düsseldorf, Germany
e-mail: altendor@phil-fak.uni-duesseldorf.de

> "John Major is slightly too old to do it. Despite his age, **Lord Tebbit** still does it, but he says **radio and television presenters** do it much more than he ever did. **Ken Livingstone M.P.** and **Tony Banks M.P.** are proud they both do it. It's so common nowadays that even **Dr. Carey**, the Archbishop of Canterbury, does it, both in public as well as in private. Mrs. Thatcher certainly has never done it and nor has the Queen, though one of her son's wives flirts with it. As **Princess Diana** was once heard saying: 'There's a lo(ʔ) of i(ʔ) abou(ʔ)'." (Rosewarne 1994, 3, my emphasis)

And now even Tony Blair does it.

> "It's the way he tells 'em. **Prime Minister** wades into estuary English for O'Connor chat show." (*The Guardian* July 1998, my emphasis)

1. The concept of 'Estuary English' (EE) according to its 'founder' David Rosewarne

The term 'Estuary English' was coined by David Rosewarne in 1984. In his *locus classicus* article published in the *Times Educational Supplement* he defines EE as

> [...] a variety of modified regional speech. It is a mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation. If one imagines a **continuum with RP and London speech at either end**, 'Estuary English' speakers are to be found **grouped in the middle ground**. (Rosewarne 1984, 29; Rosewarne 1994, 5, my emphasis)

From a ***geographical*** point of view, EE is said to have been first spoken "by the banks of the Thames and its estuary" (Rosewarne 1984, 29), then became "the most influential accent in the south-east of England" (Rosewarne 1984, 29) and is now spreading "northwards to Norwich and westwards to Cornwall" (Rosewarne 1994, 4). From a ***sociological*** point of view, EE is reported to be used by speakers who constitute the social "middle ground" (Rosewarne 1984, 29). This definition includes speakers who want to conform to (linguistic) middle class norms either by moving up or down the social scale. The first group aims at EE in order to sound more 'posh', the second to sound less 'posh' both avoiding the elitist character of RP. This social compromise is also reflected in the linguistic make-up of EE. It comprises features of RP as well as non-standard London English thus borrowing the positive prestige from both accents without committing itself to either. This vagueness makes it extremely difficult to pin EE down linguistically.

As major ***phonological*** markers of EE, Rosewarne (1984, 29) names

- /t/-glottalling as in [ˈgæʔwɪk ˈeəpɔːʔ] for *Gatwick Airport*
- /l/-vocalization as in [ˈpiːpo] for *people*
- /j/-dropping as in [ˈnuːz] for *news*
- the diphthongal realisation of /iː/ and final /ɪ/ as in [ˈməɪ] for *me* and [ˈsɪtəɪ] for *city*

However, all of these variants also occur in other social accents in London and the southeast and beyond this area. The whole set of markers is furthermore involved in contemporary sound changes affecting the neighbouring varieties of EE including RP (cf. 3.1.2). This lack of 'exclusiveness' becomes even more striking when it comes to the lexical and grammatical features of EE. Rosewarne names for example *cheers* for *thank you/good bye* and a more frequent use of question tags.

2. **Attempts at further precision**

Despite all the problems of definition, the term and concept of EE have caught on. In 1993 ***Paul Coggle*** publishes a guide on how to speak EE. Coggle is also more aware of the 'demarcation problem' than his predecessor and therefore defines EE as a 'continuum' variety on a continuum between Cockney and RP:

> It should now be clear that Estuary English cannot be pinned down to a rigid set of rules regarding specific features of pronunciation, grammar and special phrases. A speaker at the Cockney end of the spectrum is not so different from a Cockney speaker. And similarly, a speaker at the RP end of the spectrum will not be very different from an RP speaker. Between the two extremes is quite a range of possibilities, many of which, in isolation, would not enable us to identify a person as an Estuary speaker, but which when several are present together mark out Estuary English distinctively.
> (Coggle 1993, 70)

On the basis of such a wide definition he allows for more Estuary markers than Rosewarne including for example TH fronting, as in ['fɪŋk] for *think,* for those at the Cockney end of the spectrum. Although it is certainly true that linguistic varieties cannot be defined with the same 'rigidity' as legal or scientific terms, it is, however, hardly satisfying to wait for several London or southeastern speakers to "be present together" to "enable us to identify a person as an Estuary speaker". There should be at least some categories on the basis of which EE can be more firmly approached (though perhaps not 'pinned down'). John Wells' work on EE makes an important step in this direction.

Wells agrees with Rosewarne and Coggle on the middle-ground character of EE and also admits to a certain vagueness of the term:

> Many of our native-speaker undergraduates use a variety of English that I suppose we have to call Estuary English, following Rosewarne 1884, 1994, Coggle 1993, and many recent reports on press and television [...] This means that their accent is located somewhere in the continuum between RP and broad Cockney [...] As with the equally unsatisfactory term 'Received Pronunciation', we are forced to go along.
> (Wells 1995, 261)

He has, however, proposed categories for establishing a boundary between EE and its end-of-the spectrum varieties. According to Wells, the major difference between EE and RP is localizability with EE being localizable as belonging to the southeast of England and RP being regionally neutral. The major difference between EE and Cockney is grammatical correctness with Cockney speakers using non-standard grammar whereas EE speakers don't (Wells 1995, 262). In addition to this distinction, he proposes a set of phonological variables which are either typical of Cockney but not of EE or typical of both. *Table 1* shows this classification for three of his ten variables.

Phonetic markers[1] (Wells 1998)	*Example*	**Cockney**	**EE**
TH fronting	['fɪŋk] for *think*	+	-
/t/-glottalling in intervocalic position	['bʌʔə] for *butter*	+	**-**
/t/-glottalling finally etc.	['gæʔwɪk] for *Gatwick*	+	+
vocalisation of preconsonantal and prepausal /l/ (**'dark /l/'**)	['mɪok] for *milk* ['pi:po] for *people*	+	+

Table 1

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[1] The terms used here are adapted to those used throughout the paper.

3. **A closer look at three markers of EE**

The following discussion is part of a larger project on EE in which the phonological as well as 'attitudinal' variables of EE are studied on an empirical basis. It focuses on a selection of three key linguistic variables, /t/-glottalling, /l/-vocalisation and TH fronting (cf. *table 1*), and a limited corpus of six female speakers who display linguistic patterns representative of those of other speakers in the same locality. The results obtained in this analysis will later be compared to results obtained on a broader corpus base in follow-up studies which are presently being conducted.

The discussion addresses the following questions:

(a) What are the linguistic and social patterns of diffusion of /t/-glottalling, /l/-vocalisation and TH fronting on the continuum between Cockney and RP?

(b) Can any of them serve as 'boundary markers' between EE and its neighbouring varieties as proposed by Wells (cf. *table 1*)?

(c) Are they creeping into the 'realm of RP' which according to Rosewarne is already under attack from EE?

This discussion will not propose a final definition of EE. It can only approach a more detailed description of the concept in question by shedding more light on three of its presumed features.

3.1 **Methodology**

3.1.1 **Extra-linguistic variables**

'Accent classification': Cockney, EE and RP

A major methodological problem of this study lies in the definition of the 'varieties' in question. They manifest certain similarities with respect to the dimensions normally used in order to define them. Geographical factors cannot play a major role as Cockney and EE belong roughly to the same region. Phonetic factors cannot be made use of at all as it is the phonetic make-up of the these accents that this study has set out to establish. Social factors are therefore the only dimension left according to which speakers can be categorised. The regional aspect will, however, be taken into consideration as well.

Regional background

In accordance with Rosewarne's definition of EE (cf. page 1), the present investigation was carried out in London as part of the "heartland of this variety". All speakers were born and brought up in Central or Greater London. For Cockney[2], speakers in the East End of London as the traditional home of Cockney speakers were interviewed. For EE, speakers in a South London middle class suburb were interviewed. For RP, a 'neutral' Central London school was chosen since RP is defined as regionally 'neutral'.

Social background

The underlying notion of 'social stratification' as the "product of social differentiation and social evaluation" (Labov 1972, 44) is taken from Labov's study in New York City. In the present study it is not the prestige of department stores but the prestige of schools by which the speakers are stratified. This stratification is based on the social prestige attributed to the schools they attend. This in return is measured by the amount of money which parents are able and prepared to pay for their children's education.

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[2]   The term 'Cockney' is used as a cover-term for broad working-class London accents including traditional Cockney and popular London (cf. Wells 1982, 302). Furthermore, it is only the accent aspect of Cockney that is studied in this investigation.

Styles
The classification of styles is based on Labov's notion of contextual styles. The interview style (IS) was obtained when the students were asked about school life and free-time activities. The reading style (RS) and the word list style (WLS) are the result of elicitation tasks which were intended to elicit the target linguistic variables.

London Secondary School	Location	Accent 'classification'	Students: Lower Sixth	Style
Comprehensive School school fee: non	working class area in the East End	Cockney	2	(IS) Interview Style
Public School I school fee: £1000,00 +	residential area in the South of London	EE (?)	2	(RS) Reading Style
Public School II school fee: £3000,00 +	Central London	RP	2	(WLS) World List Style

Table 2

3.1.2 **Linguistic variables** (cf. also *table 1*)

The linguistic variables chosen for the present discussion are central to the notion of EE. /t/-glottalling and /l/-vocalisation are the only variables mentioned by Rosewarne, Coggle and Wells alike. /t/-glottalling in intervocalic position is moreover considered to be a 'boundary marker' between EE and Cockney. The same is alleged to be true for TH fronting.

/l/-vocalisation
The use of a vocalised variant for 'dark /l/' started off as a well-known feature of Cockney about a century ago. It used to be "overtly stigmatized being disapproved of by the speech-conscious" (Wells 1982, 314). Nevertheless, it has found its way into RP where it is currently making rapid progress. Wells is so bold as to predict that "it seems likely that it will become entirely standard in English over the course of the next century" (Wells 1982, 259). The question to be studied is whether there is still a difference of frequency in the use of the vocalised variant in Cockney, EE and RP.

/t/-glottalling
The history of /t/-glottalling, i.e. glottal replacement of post-vocalic /t/, is very similar to that of /l/-vocalisation. The glottal stop started off as a stigmatised stereotype of Cockney[3] and is now very much on the increase (cf. Milroy 1994, 4). It has also entered RP although its social acceptability still depends on the phonetic context. When comparing EE to Cockney and RP, the most central questions in this respect are:
1. What is the difference between these accents with regard to the relative frequency of the glottal variant?
2. What is the difference with regard to the distribution of the glottal variant in different phonetic contexts. The touchstone will be /t/ in intervocalic position (cf. *table 1*) and perhaps also in prelateral position as these contexts are still regarded as "sharply stigmatized" (Wells 1982, 261). Coggle gives the following graphic account:

> Using the glottal stop between vowels is a bit like wearing a tattoo: whether you realise it or not, certain doors will be closed to you. (Coggle 1993, 41)

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3   It is, however, not confined to Cockney.

TH fronting

The use of the labio-dental fricatives /f/ and /v/ for the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ is another well-known feature of the proverbial Cockney[4]. It has recently been noted as spreading through non-standard accents in England (cf. Trudgill 1988, 43). In contrast to /t/-glottalling and /l/-vocalisation, it has, however, not 'officially' entered RP yet. The question to study is whether TH fronting can also serve as a 'boundary marker' between EE and Cockney.

3.2 **Results**

3.2.1 **Relative frequency of /l/-vocalisation**
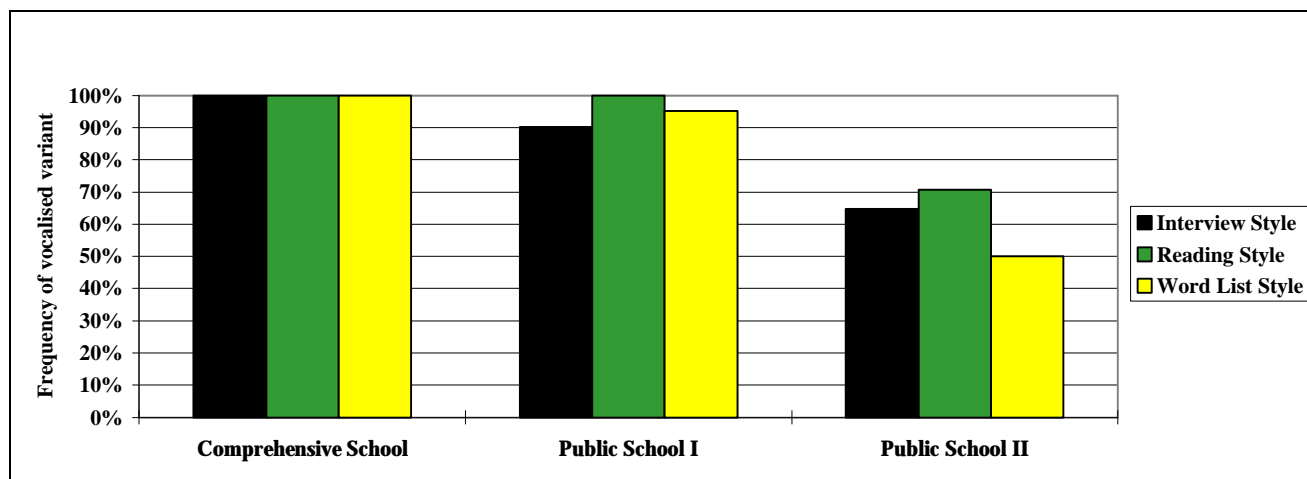
Figure 1: Variable (l) by school and style

/l/-vocalisation seems to be firmly established in all three classes and styles. There is, however, still some social stratification left which leaves the middle-class speakers in the middle-ground with respect to the relative frequency of the vocalised variant. If EE is the language of the middle-ground speakers, then /l/-vocalisation is certainly a feature of EE. It shares this feature with Cockney, represented by the working-class speakers, and RP, represented by the public school II speakers. As the social gap is widest between the middle and upper (middle) class, the relative frequency of /l/-vocalisation can at best function as a 'boundary marker' between EE and RP. It seems, however, rather more likely that it will soon extend even further into the 'realm of RP'.

3.2.2 **Relative frequency of /t/-glottalling**

Figure 2 shows that /t/-glottalling is widely used in all three social sections. There is, however, still social and stylistic differentiation left, which is more marked than in the case of /l/-vocalisation: The difference between the working class speakers and the middle class speakers is still quite noticeable in formal styles. The difference between the middle and upper (middle) class speakers, however, is less marked. The relative frequency of /t/-glottalling can therefore at best serve as a 'boundary marker' between Cockney and EE in formal styles.

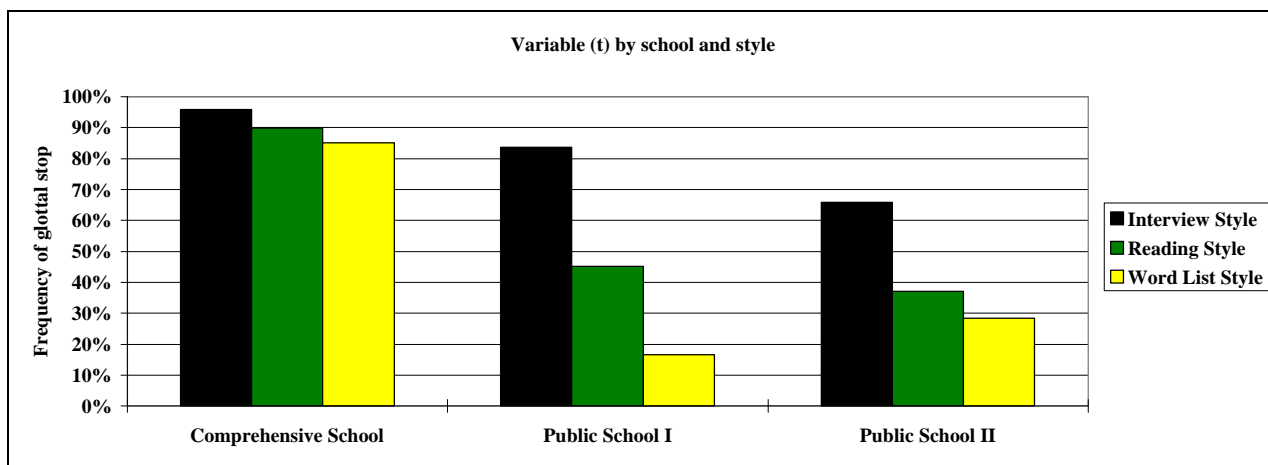4   As /t/-glottalling and /l/-vocalisation it is nevertheless not confined to Cockney.

Variable (t) by school and style

Figure 2: Variable (t) by school and style

3.2.3 **Relative frequency of /t/-glottalling in intervocalic and prelateral position**
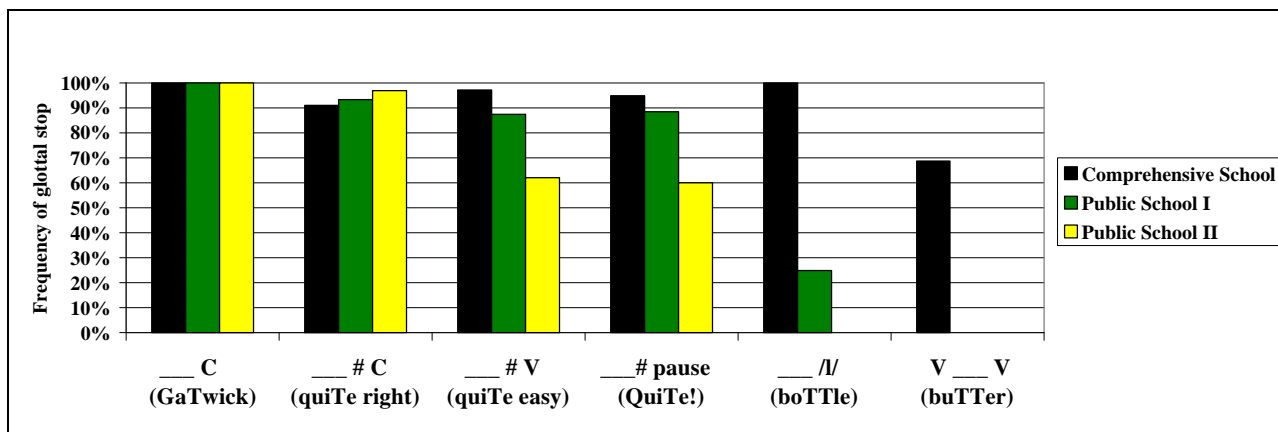
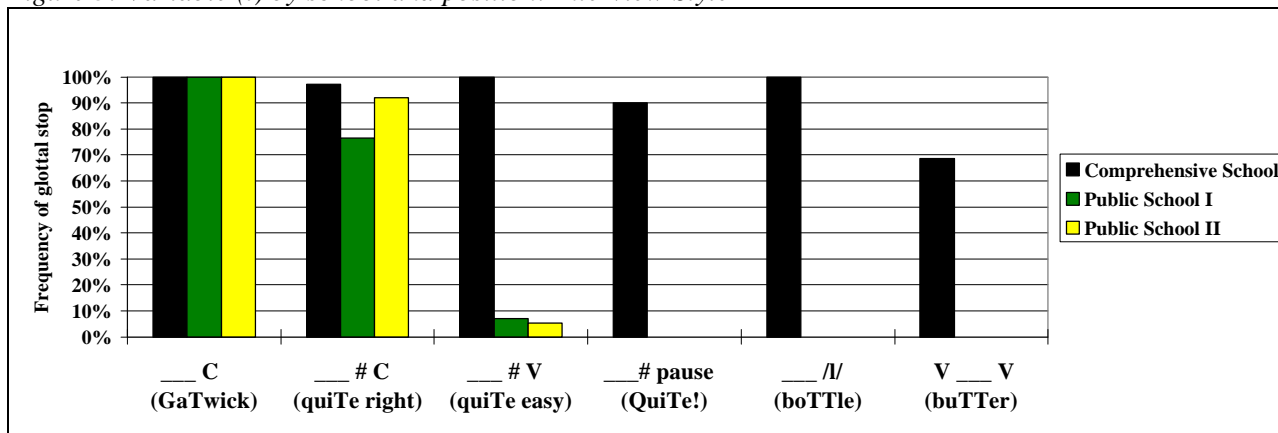Figure 3: Variable (t) by school and position: Interview Style

Figure 4: Variable (t) by school and position: Reading Style

The main research interest lies in the frequency of the glottal stop in the two last positions, preceding /l/ as *bottle* and between two vowels as in *butter*. For the working-class speakers, the glottal stop is still frequent in these positions. For the middle and upper (middle) class speakers, it is almost non-existent in the most casual of the three styles and ruled out in the most formal style. It can therefore serve as a 'boundary marker' between Cockney and EE.
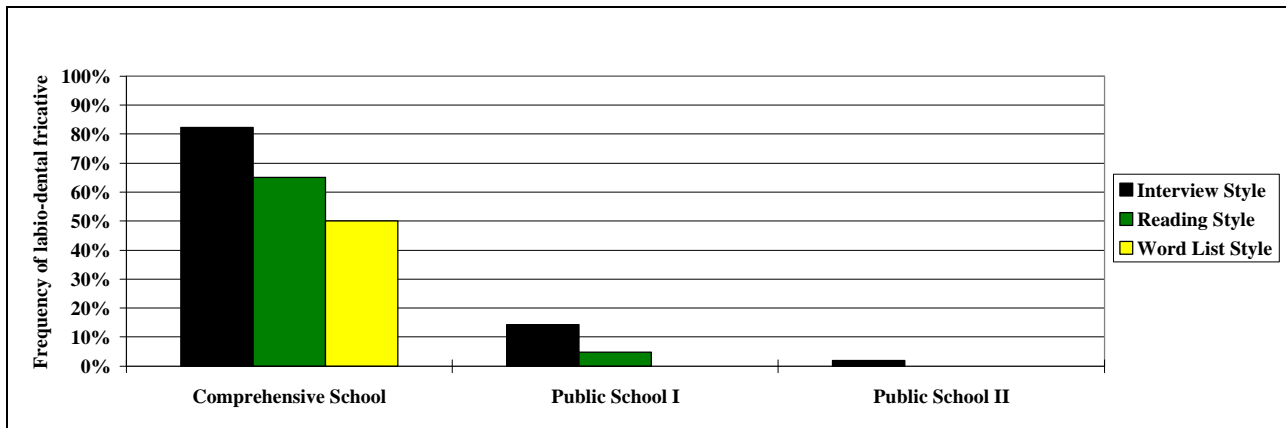
3.2.4 **Relative frequency of Th fronting**

Figure 5: Variable (th) by school and style

Although TH fronting 'pops up' occasionally in the middle and upper (middle) class accents as well, there is still a marked social difference between working and middle class speakers. TH fronting can therefore serve as a 'boundary marker' between Cockney and EE.

4. **Conclusion**

In reply to the questions formulated under 3, the findings quoted above suggest the following answers:
(a) /l/-vocalisation and /t/-glottalling are widespread in all social accents on the continuum between Cockney and RP. In the case of /t/-glottalling, there are, however, clear linguistic constraints (still) blocking the use of the glottal stop in prelateral and intervocalic position in formal styles by EE and RP speakers. TH fronting is still a feature of Cockney which is extremely rare in the other social accents.
(b) The glottal stop in intervocalic (and to a certain extent prelateral) position as well as TH fronting can (still) serve as 'boundary markers' between EE and Cockney.
(c) /l/-vocalisation as well as /t/-glottalling have already intruded into the 'realm of RP'. Furthermore, /t/-glottalling in prelateral position and TH fronting are currently making their way into the middle class accent and thus into EE. Whether they will creep into RP from there remains to be seen. One public school II speaker has already been caught producing the labio-dental instead of the dental fricative. Whether this is an embryonic variant hailing a future sound change or a mere slip of the tongue, only the future can tell.

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