

Estuary English

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By the term ‘Estuary English’ people refer to a variety of English associated with London and the surrounding Thames estuary in southeast England.

The term ‘Estuary English’ was invented by David Rosewarne in 1984, in an article in which he described it as “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. [...] The heartland of this variety lies by the banks of the Thames and its estuary.”

A few years later, the idea was picked up by the popular press, since when there has been considerable public discussion of Estuary English. New and exaggerated claims were made about it. The author Paul Coggle (1993) asserted that it could be heard in places as far away from London as north Norfolk, Dorset, the Kent coast, Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire.

Here are some ways in which EE pronunciation differs from RP.

- [t] in various syllable-final environments is replaced by the glottal stop, [ʔ], thus [geʔ ɒf] *get off*, [stɒp ɪʔ] *stop it*.
- [tj] is replaced by [tʃ] and [dj] by [dʒ], as in *tune*, *reduce*.
- [l] before a consonant or word-finally is replaced by a kind of vowel-sound, [o], thus *milk* [mɪok]
- The wide diphthongs sound different. Thus [aɪ], the diphthong in words such as *price*, *wide*, *try* has a backer starting-point, thus [aɪ]; and [aʊ], the diphthong in words such as *mouth*, *loud*, *down*, has a fronter starting-point, thus [æʊ].
- The narrower diphthongs in words such as *face*, *day* and *goat*, *no* tend to have an opener starting-point, thus [ʌɪ] and [ʌʊ].
- The weak ending *-ing* tends to be pronounced with an alveolar nasal rather than a velar nasal, thus *runnin'* (= *running*). (This is characteristic of working-class English in most parts of the English-speaking world.)
- The [t] tends to be omitted in the words *twenty* and *plenty*, and also in *want* and *went* when followed by a vowel sound. (Unlike Americans, EE speakers do not omit the [t] in words such as *winter* or *painted*.)

It has been claimed that Estuary English is “the new standard English”. Coggle’s thinks it has a “street cred” that RP lacks. I suggested redefining it as “standard English spoken with a non-RP, London-influenced accent” (Wells 1994), Nevertheless, the popular reaction to Estuary English has on the whole been unfavourable. It has often come to be seen as the sum of all the pronunciation trends that purists dislike. A minister of Education stigmatized EE as “bastardized sub-Cockney”. The word “Estuary” also apparently became confused with “Essex”, acquiring the negative connotations associated

with the outer-London eastern suburbs in that county. A recent website (written by a non-linguist) attributes to EE all the most extreme characteristics of Cockney pronunciation.

Cockney characteristics which would not be expected in EE include

- h-dropping, thus 'and, 'eart, 'edge for *hand, heart, hedge*.
- a monophthong rather than a diphthong in words like *mouth, loud, down*, thus [ma:f] etc.
- th-fronting, namely thus use of [f] and [v] rather than [θ] and [ð] respectively.
- many non-standard features of grammar and usage, e.g. *them fings* (those things), *I ain't seen no one* (I haven't seen anyone), *the boys done good* (the boys did well).

According to this analysis, the footballer David Beckham would be regarded as a speaker of Cockney rather than of Estuary English.

Some of the confusion over the definition of EE arises from the fact that Rosewarne did not allow for stylistic variation within the same accent. Furthermore, he refers to matters of vocabulary and usage as well as to pronunciation, e.g. saying *cheers* rather than *thank you*. But this is not incompatible with Standard English/RP.

It is certainly true that certain phonetic features of Cockney (th-fronting, l-vocalization) are spreading fast into other areas of England. However, the claim that a single accent, EE, is "sweeping the southeast" has been shown to be untrue. The Polish phonetician Joanna Przedlacka investigated the speech of young people in four places about 50 km away from London in different directions. She found that rather than having the same accent in these different places (the EE claim), they all retained distinct local characteristics. For example, she found that the percentage of glottal stops by teenagers varied as follows:

RP speakers (at Eton school)	8
Cockneys (in Bethnal Green, London)	85
Aylesbury, Bucks., NW of London	43
Farningham, Kent, SE of London	38
Walton on the Hill, Surrey, SW of London	21
Little Baddow, Essex, NE of London	8

It is true that most of the speakers in the areas surrounding London have glottalling scores intermediate between RP and Cockney. But they are far from being speakers of one uniform variety that we could call Estuary English.

References

- Cogle, Paul, 1993. *Do you speak Estuary?* London: Bloomsbury.
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Rosewarne, David, 1984. 'Estuary English'. *Times Educational Supplement*, 19.
Wells, John, 1994. 'Transcribing Estuary English'. *Speech, Hearing and Language* 8:
261-267.

See the website www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary.