

Why does the UK have so many accents?

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Credit: Clément Proust from Pexels

Where we come from matters. Our origins form an important part of a distinctive personality, which can become a group identity when we share these origins. More often than not, our use of language, especially

our dialect, is an expression of that distinctiveness. In addition to distinctive words and grammatical patterns, which may not follow the rules of [Standard English](#), people have accents – [many English language ones available to listen to here](#) – related to their pronunciation when they speak which [can articulate their identity](#).

Dialects and accents developed historically when groups of language users lived in relative isolation, without regular contact with other people using the same language. This was more pronounced in the past due to the lack of fast transport and mass media. People tended to hear only the language used in their own location, and when their language use changed (as language by its nature always evolves) their [dialect](#) and accent adopted a particular character, leading to national, regional and local variation.

Invasion and migration also helped to influence dialect development at a regional level. Just take the Midlands, for example. The East Midlands were ruled by the Danes in the ninth century. This resulted, for instance, in the creation of place names ending in "by" (a suffix thought to originate from the Danish word for "town"), such as Thoresby and Derby, and "thorpe" (meaning "settlement"), such as Ullesthorpe. The Danes, however, did not rule the West Midlands, where the Saxons continued to hold sway, and words of Danish origin are [largely absent from that region](#).

Who am I?

Dialects and accents are not restricted to UK English, of course. In the US, Australia and New Zealand, where English has been spoken for a much shorter period of time than in the UK, you would expect less variation as English has been spoken there for a shorter period of time. But even there, dialects and accents occur and the linguistic influence of settlers who came from certain parts of the UK such as Scotland or

Lancashire helped to determine local varieties.

A similar phenomenon appears in the UK. During the 1930s, Corby in Northamptonshire received a big influx of Scottish steelworkers. Here, there are features in the local language – for example, pronunciation of vowels in words such as "goat" or "thought" – which we think of as typically Scottish that are still used even by townsfolk who have [never been to Scotland](#).

Other factors influence language use, too. One of them is social class. Very many local accents are now associated with working-class speakers, while middle and upper-class speakers tend to use a more standardised English. But this is a relatively recent development. Indeed, until the standardisation of English from the 16th century – when one variety of English came to be used in official situations and by printing presses for the wider publication of books – it was acceptable for speakers of different social classes to speak and write in their own dialects. Then, Latin and French were regarded as prestigious languages, applied by the elite in education, law and literature.

Dialects and accents are changing and will continue to change. After all, language never stands still. Some traditional dialects are disappearing, but new urban and multicultural varieties continue to arise. Some accents are deemed "better" than others and certain features may become fashionable.

This can be influenced by music. At the moment, linguistic features of ["black English"](#), associated with hip hop, grime, R&B and rap music – such as "bae," "blood" or "brother," which can all be used as forms of address – are regarded as "cool" and are adopted by other speakers.

In addition, people change the language they use depending on who they are talking to, and why they are talking, for example formally in a job

interview or casually to friends and family at home. People also change the way they speak to make themselves understood more easily, a phenomenon called [linguistic accommodation](#).

Ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and age can all affect language usage. And there are also personal reasons for using dialects and accents to identify yourself. I have lived in England for 16 years, but you can still hear my Scottish [accent](#) and that is unlikely to change.

All the same?

Speakers' language varieties can converge (become more similar) or diverge (become more different). And as the modern world becomes increasingly connected, linguists have wondered whether dialects and accents in general are bound to disappear.

There is certainly such a thing as "dialect levelling" – differences between dialects appear to be vanishing, which could be a consequence of the rise of mass and social media. But while there is much discussion about the disappearance of dialects and accents, [public interest in the subject is growing](#).

A consensus has not yet been reached. In UK English, some features may be spreading like wildfire through the country, such as people saying "free" instead of "three" – a linguistic change known as th-fronting. But differences persist, and speakers in Liverpool still sound very different to speakers in Plymouth.

In my opinion, dialects and accents are here to stay. Humans enjoy being part of groups, and we can consider [language](#) as a key means of expressing the perceived differences between "us" and "them."

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