

Cockney and Queen's English have all but disappeared among young people—here's what's replaced them

October 30 2023, by Amanda Cole



Credit: Nesrin Öztürk from Pexels

Cockney and received pronunciation (Queen's English) were once spoken by people of all ages, but they are no longer commonly spoken

among young people in the south-east of England.

In new [research](#), colleagues and I recorded the voices of 193 people between the ages of 18 and 33 from across south-east England and London. We then built a computer algorithm which "listened" to how they spoke and grouped them by how similarly they pronounced vowels in different words.

We identified three main accents: [standard southern British English](#), [multicultural London English](#) and [estuary English](#).

What defines these accents?

Around 26% of our participants spoke [estuary](#) English, which has similarities with Cockney but is more muted and closer to received pronunciation. The people in our sample who spoke estuary English would pronounce words like "house" a bit like "hahs", but not as extreme as you would find in Cockney. Estuary English is spoken across the south-east, particularly in parts of Essex, and is similar to how Stacey Dooley, Olly Murs, Adele or Jay Blades speak.

Standard southern British English—which many perceive as a prestigious, "standard" or "neutral" sounding accent—is a modern, updated version of received pronunciation. SSBE speakers, who made up 49% of our sample, tended to say words like "goose" with the tongue further forward in the mouth (sounding a bit more like "geese") than what we would expect in received pronunciation.

This change even happened in the [accent of Queen Elizabeth II](#) over her lifetime. We could probably consider Ellie Goulding, Josh Widdicombe and maybe even Prince Harry to speak with this accent.

We found that speakers of standard southern British English and estuary

English generally tended to be white British, and women were more likely than men to speak the former. It's not surprising to find that women speak in a more socially prestigious way, as much [previous research](#) suggests—women are often more chastised for speaking with regional accents than men.

Notably, standard southern British English and estuary English are not as different from each other as Cockney and received pronunciation. This could be evidence of what's known as dialect leveling—where [young people](#) from different parts of the region now speak more similarly to each other than their parents or grandparents did.

This occurs as a result of the increased movement of people resulting in greater contact between dialects, the growth of universal education and literacy, and people buying into the idea that there is a "correct" or "standard" way of speaking.

This is not to say that there are no new or innovative ways of speaking today. One example is an accent which linguists call multicultural London English, first noted in recent decades in the speech of young east Londoners. This accent has similarities with Cockney and other south-eastern accents, but also has influences from other languages and dialects of English.

The young people with a multicultural London English accent (around 25% in our sample) said the vowels in words like *bate* and *boat* with the tongue starting at a point higher up in the mouth compared to standard southern British English so that they might sound a little bit more like "beht" and "boht".

They tended to be Asian British or Black British and many were from London, but there were also people from across the south-east who spoke with elements of a multicultural London English accent. Bukayo

Saka, Little Simz and Stormzy could be examples of people who speak with these features.

Accents change—does that matter?

Cockney, the working-class, London accent of Barbara Windsor or [Michael Caine](#), and received pronunciation, which some call Queen's English (or perhaps now King's English), did not appear in our analysis. That's not to say that there aren't any young people in our sample who might have spoken these accents, but if so, they were too few and far between for the algorithm to identify.

For decades, some educators, politicians and commentators have expressed concern that received pronunciation is being replaced by estuary English, allegedly representing a decline in standards. In 1995, the then education secretary, Gillian Shephard, [vowed](#) to combat the growth of slang among schoolchildren and the spread of estuary English.

In 2014, facing criticism for airing different regional accents, the BBC [stated](#) that they do "not aspire to be a 'guardian'" of received pronunciation—also sometimes called BBC English.

Estuary English and multicultural London English are both often criticized and devalued. [Research](#) has shown that Londoners who don't speak MLE think of it as a form of "broken language", "language decay" or "fake language".

Linguists have ardently [pushed back](#) against unfounded claims that multicultural London English has "pushed out" Cockney, that it represents a dumbing-down of language or that it is inauthentic.

There is no scientific or logical argument to support the idea that these accents are inferior, less articulate or less grammatically rich than any

other accent. They simply reflect where a person is from and their background and experiences.

The way accents are described feeds directly into how the people who speak with these accents are judged.

Attempting to prevent accents from changing is like sweeping back an incoming tide with a broom—fruitless and defying nature. Instead, we should embrace [linguistic diversity](#), work to combat [accentism](#) (discrimination based on a person's [accent](#)), and accept that accents will always continue to change.

More information: Amanda Cole et al, The search for linguistically coherent accents, *English World-Wide. A Journal of Varieties of English* (2023). [DOI: 10.1075/eww.22054.col](https://doi.org/10.1075/eww.22054.col)

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Cockney and Queen's English have all but disappeared among young people—here's what's replaced them (2023, October 30) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-10-cockney-queen-english-young-peoplehere.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.