

Accents in the English-speaking world



English is not a logical language when it comes to pronunciation. Just think of the long vowel sound in these words: meat, meet, receive, delete. Four spellings for the same sound. And then we have the different ways of pronouncing English around the world, in different regions of the same country and between people of different classes. Read on to find out more about the way we speak English ...

Accents in the UK

The people of Britain have many different accents, and it's not just the difference between Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish and English. Even within England there are huge differences in the way people speak, from Brummie English in Birmingham to Geordie in Newcastle, from Scouse in Liverpool to Cockney in London, from Mancunian in Manchester to Bristolian in the West Country.

When students talk about wanting to learn British English, they usually mean RP, or *Received Pronunciation*, also called the *Queen's English* or *Oxford English*. This is an accent which is accentless, meaning that you can't tell where in the UK the speaker comes from if he/she is speaking RP. As accent has so much to do with class in Britain, the way people speak not only tells you about where they come from ... but also where they are on the social scale. The higher up the social ladder you are, the more likely you are to speak with a more RP 'accent'.

You can **listen to regional British accents and dialects** by clicking on:

<http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/sounds/index.html>

or on:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/recordings/index.shtml>

Just choose the region you're interested in on the maps given on the sites.

Accents on stage: *Pygmalion*/*My Fair Lady*

George Bernard Shaw wanted to take a critical look at the rigid class system of his time in the UK and the way it was reflected in people's speech, and wrote the play *Pygmalion* to show this. The play was first performed in 1913.

Most people know the musical/film *My Fair Lady*, which is based on *Pygmalion*. In the play, Professor Higgins has a bet with his friend, Colonel Pickering, that he can take a common flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, and pass her off as a duchess by teaching her to speak with an RP 'accent'. The most famous quote from his play is, *The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain*, which Eliza first says in a very Cockney accent as *The rine in Spine sties minely in the pline*. And, after having lessons from Professor Higgins, people are fooled by Eliza's social status when she goes to a ball – and Professor Higgins wins the bet:

If you are interested in **more information about the musical *My Fair Lady***, just click on:

<http://www.myfairladythemusical.com/index.php>

NB: Click on *About the Show* and then on *images/video* to enjoy Eliza's *The rain in Spain* ... when she got it right in the end (about halfway through the video) ... much to Higgins' relief.

Differences between North American and British English

One of the main differences between the way English is spoken is between North American speech and British English. There are, of course, many dialects and accents within these two types of English, but these are usually recognisable to other people from the same country.

Test your knowledge of American and British pronunciation with this little quiz:

<http://xportal.klett-sprachen.de/club/0007>

If you want to find out more about **examples of English accents** from all around the world, click on:

<http://www.soundcomparisons.com/>



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Fact file on English Pronunciation

- Only 2% of British English speakers speak with an RP accent.
- Some British films were dubbed for American audiences because of the accents in them. The most famous recent example was *Trainspotting*.
- Wikipedia lists 30 different regional accents and dialects for the UK alone.
- The BBC first started using announcers with strong regional accents during the Second World War in order to distinguish their programmes from Nazi propaganda.

For some **fun facts on English pronunciation**, just click on:

http://www.espindle.org/fun_facts.html