



| David Crystal on language |

# BBC ENGLISH

## AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE

L'accento britannico è strettamente legato alla classe sociale. E l'inglese della BBC, detto anche Received Pronunciation, è indissolubilmente legato ai ceti privilegiati. Un tempo chi non era altolocato parlava così per darsi un tono, mentre oggi, che va di moda l'accento 'popolare', sono i ricchi a parlare come i poveri... confusi? Niente paura: ci spiega tutto il professor David Crystal! BY MARK WORDEN

C1 ADVANCED



SPEAKERS DAVID CRYSTAL  
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TRACK 16

### David Crystal

(Standard British accent)

Received Pronunciation is an accent that evolved in England round about the turn of the 1800s. It's only about a couple of hundred years old. It's an accent that was associated with the South East of England, specifically London and even more specifically the court<sup>1</sup> and parliament and the judiciary<sup>2</sup> and the Church of England and so on. It was the accent of institutional Britain, and also the accent of the universities. So it was a kind of triangle; Oxford, Cambridge, London in the South East, where you'd associate RP, predominantly, plus the public schools<sup>3</sup>, of course, that were in that part of the country.

### US AND THEM

Now, it evolved at the end of the 18th century, specifically as an upper-class accent, quite unconsciously so, but also conscious, to some extent. People realised that they had to... if you wanted to retain a distinction between "us" and "them" – "us" being upper-class

and "them" being lower class – and this rather curious group of people called "middle class" that were coming into being at the time: you know, the new industrialists, who were making the Industrial Revolution work, who had lots of money, but they had (*imitates the upper-class accent*) "a very poor accent!" And you wanted to keep yourself different from them! And so RP develops as a kind of contrast between the way these people spoke and the way the upper classes felt they should like to speak. So you notice it. I mean, RP is probably the only common accent in the world that doesn't have an "r" after a vowel: we say "ca" (car) and "fa" (far) and so on in RP. Everybody else says things like (*imitates the West Country accent*) "carr" or (*imitates Scottish accent*) "carr" or something of this kind. And why? Well, because (*imitates the upper-class accent*) "If ordinary people go "err," then we will not!" You see, there is that kind of contrast implicit there, and there are lots of other features like the use of "h": in RP you

must put the "h" in, in words like hospital, and you must never put it in if it's not there in the spelling. Why? Because in 1800 people knew that Cockney speakers did the opposite. A Cockney person would say, (*imitates Cockney accent*) "I 'urt my harm." I 'urt – meaning "h-u-r-t," but dropping the "h" – "my harm" – a-r-m for your arm, but putting the "h" in: (*imitates upper-class accent*) "Well, if Cockneys do that, we will not!" You see, so there is, again, this distinction between how they speak and how we speak. RP grew out of that<sup>4</sup>.

### GLOSSARY

- 1 **court:** tribunale
- 2 **judiciary:** magistratura
- 3 **public schools:** i college privati (v. Speak Up explains)
- 4 **grew out of that:** è nata da questo
- 5 **civil servants:** funzionari pubblici
- 6 **figures:** cifre
- 7 **attitude surveys:** sondaggi sull'atteggiamento
- 8 **shift:** cambiamento
- 9 **posh:** elitario, altolocato
- 10 **whereas:** mentre
- 11 **commercial:** pubblicità
- 12 **hardly ever:** quasi mai
- 13 **dramatic:** straordinario



The upper middle class BBC accent used to be considered desirable, but that is no longer the case. This is why celebrity chef Jamie Oliver (above) speaks with a "Mockney" (Mock Cockney) working-class London accent, even though he is from a middle class family.



The late Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was the opposite. She was born in Lincolnshire and had a regional accent, but took elocution lessons in order to sound like a member of the upper classes.

## THE VOICE OF THE EMPIRE

It became the language of the public schools. It was taught to the kids, these kids in turn became the civil servants<sup>5</sup>, and others, the Members of Parliament, the British Empire was evolving. These are the people who took English around the world, speaking Received Pronunciation, and slowly the notion of it as the status, the privilege, the "educated accent" of England grew. It has never been a frequent accent, though, apart from that. It's never been spoken by more than 5 per cent of the population of England, never been spoken as a norm in Scotland and Wales and Ireland, of course. So it's always been an elite accent: a very important one, the voice of official Britain, as it were, on the radio and all the rest of it, and the voice of the Empire, and it's diminishing now. I don't know what the figures<sup>6</sup> are nowadays; it must be round about 2 per cent of the population of England still speaks RP, but a very important accent still for foreign learners of English.

## A QUESTION OF CLASS...

As David Crystal says, accent in Britain is related to social class,

and for this reason many people hate RP:

### David Crystal

Well, if you do attitude surveys<sup>7</sup> of accents, you find a noticeable shift<sup>8</sup> in the last 20 or 30 years. Sociolinguists do surveys like this: you record a sentence in different accents and you ask people to judge the different effect of the accent. So you give them a questionnaire to fill in, and you ask questions like: Is the speaker educated? Is the speaker honest? Is the speaker intelligent? Is the speaker respectable? and so on. Now, 20, 30 years ago, RP was getting "plus, plus, plus, plus, plus" all the time. Of course, if you speak RP, you must be honest and intelligent and educated, and if you speak a regional accent, you must be dishonest and unintelligent and so on! These days things have changed. A

lot of negative vibrations now come with RP. People listen to the RP accent and many will say – many will still love it, of course, but many will say, "Oh, it's posh<sup>9</sup>! Oh, it's not very friendly! Oh, it's distant, it's not customer-friendly," whereas<sup>10</sup> a regional accent is often felt to be the opposite. And the evidence? All you have to do is look at television commercials<sup>11</sup> and ask the question: When do you hear an RP accent in a television commercial? And the answer will be: these days hardly ever<sup>12</sup>. And you will hear regional accents, Scottish English, Yorkshire English, Welsh English and so on, as being the way that the advertising companies feel their products will sell, so there's been a dramatic<sup>13</sup> shift in the attitudes around accents in recent times.

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**Public schools.** I college. Il termine britannico *public school* è un terribile *false friend*: non significa scuola pubblica, bensì college (privato). Scuola pubblica in inglese si dice *state school*. Nell'inglese americano invece *public school* significa (giustamente) scuola pubblica!

**Educated accent.** Accento colto. Anche *education* e *educated* sono *false friends* perché non significano educazione ed educato, bensì istruzione e istruito. Come nella canzone dei Pink Floyd, *Another Brick in the Wall*, quando gli studenti cantano: *We don't need no education!*

Speak Up  
**EXPLAINS**