
An Englishman's way of speaking absolutely classifies him.
The moment he talks he makes some other Englishman despise him.

If you spoke as she does, sir,
Instead of the way you do,
Why, you might be selling flowers, too!

George Bernard Shaw Pygmalion

Accentuate the positive: If you want to help the white working class, try tackling your own prejudices about accents

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In the universe of thinktanks, the Runnymede Trust are pretty close to being (1)_____ guys. They don't abuse official statistics, they often commission well-designed (2)_____ of their own, and they frequently commission Danny Dorling, who is one of the few genuine straight-shooters working in their (3)_____ area.

So their latest (4)_____, Who Cares about The White Working Class? was always going to be worth (5)_____. The white working class, and the genuine concerns of, is a subject very dear to my own heart, as it is such a ferocious (6)_____ of politicised bullshit in British public life, and the RT report does sterling work in clearing up some of the myths.

It's a pretty difficult report to (7)_____, so I'll just concentrate on one of the important issues it raises, which has also been a personal bugbear for as long as I've been an adult – the unbelievably stupid but totally ubiquitous British (8)_____ of judging people on the basis of the accent they speak with.

First – and it is next to impossible to convince your average Brit of this – nobody else in the world cares. I've worked over the last 10 years with French, Dutch and Swiss people, Germans and Yanks, and basically, we all sound more or less alike to them. Even the Irish don't really differentiate between British accents all that much.

Think about how you can sort of tell the difference between a native of Georgia and a Canadian, if you really concentrate, but basically they both just sound "sort of American". That's the difference between Billy Connolly and Brian Sewell, to anyone not brought up in our class system. The only difference foreigners can detect is that some of us speak a bit faster than others. Which foreigners don't like, by the way, because it makes us harder to understand.

Second, the way someone speaks is quite simply not reflective of their intelligence or character. There have been any number of surveys on which accents are regarded by the British public as "more friendly", "more trustworthy" and so on, usually produced on behalf of the call-centre industry. They're just another reflection of the fact that you can get pretty much anyone to make an idiot of themselves in a survey.

One of the most intelligent guys I ever met had a Middlesbrough accent so thick I could hardly understand him (he's since moved to the US, where they understand him just fine). One of the sharpest and most incorruptible stockbrokers I ever worked with had the shadiest scouse accent you've ever heard. One of the most down-to-earth, open and friendly guys I ever knew spoke like an old Etonian, because he was one. Judging people on the way they speak is the most unbelievably pointless form of bigotry there is.

But most important, the ubiquity and importance of accent-based discrimination, as set out in the Runnymede Trust report,

underlines the key point about the white working class. And that is that it doesn't really exist as a separate entity from the British working class in general.

White working class people and ethnic minority working class people speak with the same accents. The 7/7 bombers sounded like Yorkshiremen, because they were (although fair's fair, the so-called "moderate" Yorkshiremen such as Alan Bennett and Geoffrey Boycott did for the most part do their best to dissociate themselves). Black Brummies speak with a Birmingham accent; Chinese people from Manchester speak with Manc accents, and so forth, and so on.

Working class people, as the trust report shows, have to put up with discrimination on the basis of "their accent, their style, the food they eat, the clothes they wear, the social spaces they frequent, the postcode of their homes, possibly even their names". They have to put up with people, including in

the comments section of this blog, trying to draw a distinction between a mythical, idealised "decent working class" and actually existing "chavs and scum", in order to rationalise this bigotry (there simply isn't such a fine dividing line, just as there isn't really a fine distinction between the "decent middle class" and a bunch of tax-evading snobs and bigots).

There's just no evidence, though, that those of them who are white have to put up with additional discrimination because they are white. So if you want to do something for the white working class, then probably the best start is to give up your mental tutting when someone pronounces their vowels longer or shorter than you do, or says "like" in a sentence when you'd say "actually". You'll meet some interesting folk that way. What this country needs is a lot more "you know worra mean, like?" and a lot less "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jan/23/runnymede-trust-working-class-regional-accents>

How much do you know about British accents?

<http://uvic.co.uk/life-in-the-uk/how-much-do-you-know-about-british-accents%3F>

The British population is smaller than one-quarter of the population of the United States, and the UK is about one-fortieth of the size of the US in terms of its land area. This being the case, you may be surprised to learn that the UK has many more accents than the US. In fact, British accents in different regions can vary greatly.

Historically, British accents didn't just indicate which region a person comes from; they also indicated social class. For example, Received Pronunciation (RP) represented the upper-middle class, including the royal family. Estuary English was the representative accent of the middle class in southeast England, and Cockney was considered a very typical accent of the traditional working class in London (particularly East London). RP (also known as the Queen's English) is still widely regarded as the Standard English accent in the United Kingdom.

Don't be fooled into thinking that a "London accent" is standard English. In fact, London doesn't have just one accent! There are many accents that prevail in different areas

of London, with Cockney being just one example.

The variety of accents across the whole of the UK is even greater! In central England, around Birmingham, people speak English with a tune-like sound and rounded vowels (the number 5 is pronounced "foive", for example). This accent is called Brummie. In northwest England, around Liverpool, people generally have an accent called Scouse. One feature of a Scouse accent is to *almost* delete "t" sounds at the end of a statement, making them sound more like a weak "h" sound. For example: "Don't worry about ih." John Lennon and George Harrison of The Beatles are good examples of people with Scouse accents. In northeast England, around Newcastle, people speak with an accent called Geordie, which inserts a French-like "r" sounds into words like "plaster" (Geordie: "plarster") and replaces "ow" sounds with "oo" (so, "toon" instead of "town" and "poond" instead of "pound"). For people unfamiliar with these accents, Scouse and Geordie can be especially hard to understand.

In Wales, people have their own independent language in addition to English. This language is called Welsh. In both speaking and writing, Welsh is very different from English.

In Scotland, the accent sounds very different from the Queen's English. Different areas of Scotland have different accents. The Glaswegian accent of Glasgow is one well-known example. One characteristic of the Scottish accent in general is that vowel length distinctions are different in Scotland than for other English accents. You may even notice some different vocabulary in Scotland (for example, "wee" means "little").

No one accent is "better" than another, and it is a thing of the past to divide social classes by accents. At present, there is a trend toward strengthening local accents around the UK. For example, since the 1970s, the BBC has changed its way of broadcasting from only using RP to embracing broadcasters with a variety of accents.

Don't worry if you have trouble understanding people's English at first. Even native English speakers can have trouble with some of the UK's heavier accents. Be patient, and with time, you'll be able to understand people without any problem!

Accentuate the positive:

If you want to help the white working class, try tackling your own prejudices about accents

1. How does the writer justify his statement about British & accents?
2. What issue do foreigners have with English native speakers?
3. How does the writer further justify his opinion that focusing on accent is pointless?
4. What does the writer mean by a thick accent?
5. What does the writer mean by a shady accent?
6. What does the writer say about working class people.

How much do you know about British accents?

1. What is surprising about the UK compared with the US?
2. What is RP?
3. What are Brummie, Scouse and Geordie?
4. What role has the BBC played in regional accents?
5. Why should non-native speakers not despair?