



# Sociophonology

*AJ22066 Pronunciation Varieties of English*

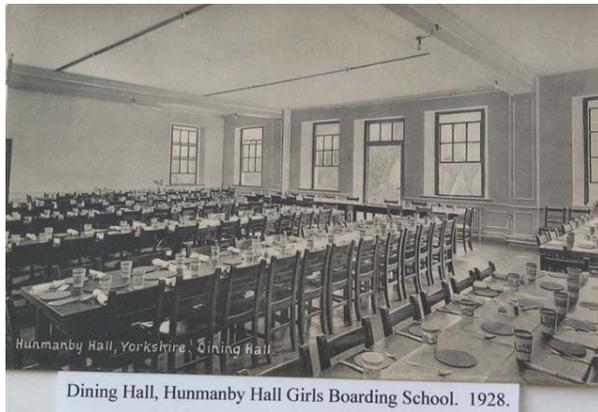
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## 2 Accent standardization: The case of RP

**18th century:** concern with the „correct“ pronunciation of words



**19th century:** system of boarding schools (public schools): standardized English Accent became prestigious  
(*Public School Pronunciation*)

**20th century:** new medium of radio and TV  
(diffusion of the RP)

since 1926: term **Received Pronunciation (RP)**



### 3 Two forms of RP

#### UNMARKED

mainstream variety associated with BBC newsreaders, doctors, teachers

*Markings*= indicators of special social privilege



#### MARKED

members of the royal family, aristocracy, university teachers at Cambridge and Oxford

Until recently, acquisition of marked RP was desirable and was worth investing in very expensive forms of education (public schools like Eton, Harrow)

BUT beyond the groups of its own speakers, it could sound even ridiculous!

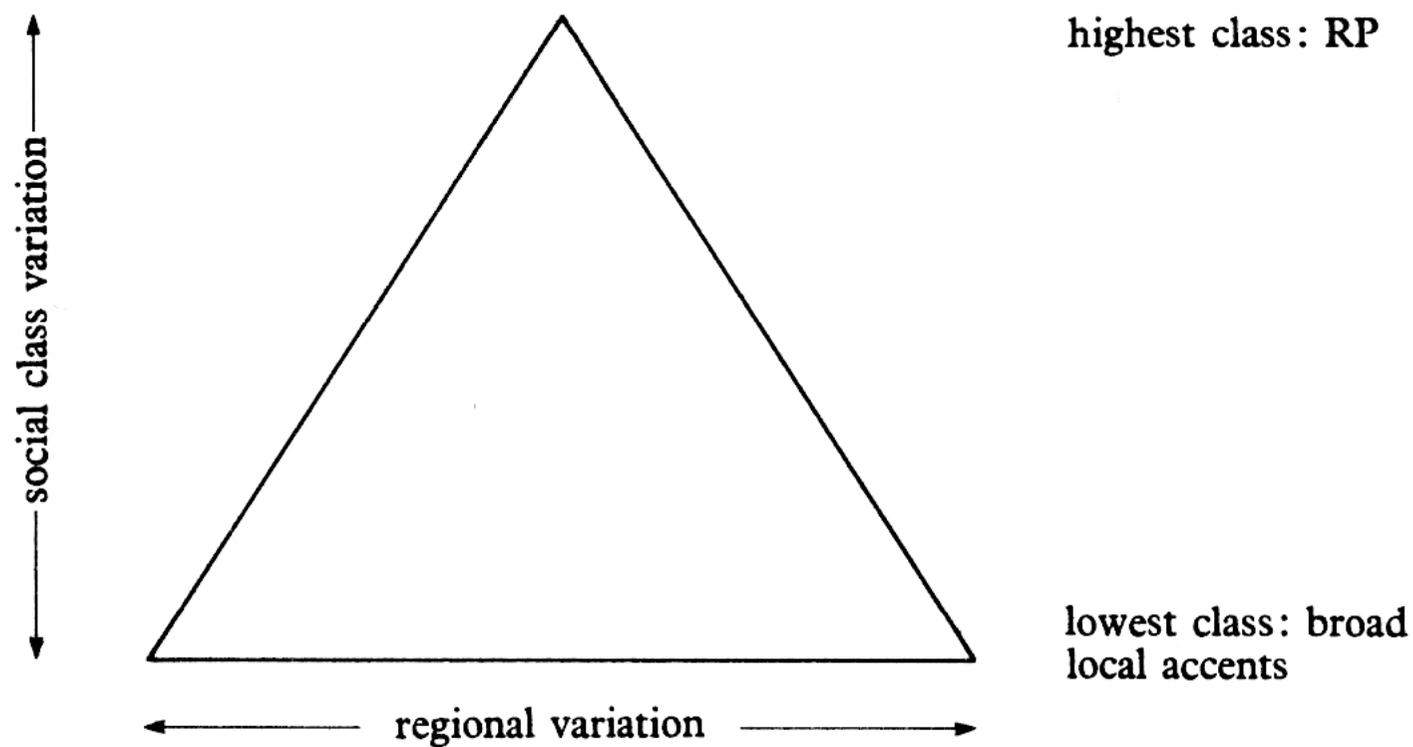
Educated speakers usually use entirely *standard form of English* but with an accent which is not RP, it is rather something between RP and the local accents.

Here you can find an interesting article about the Queen's English: [Queen's speech ,less posh'](#)

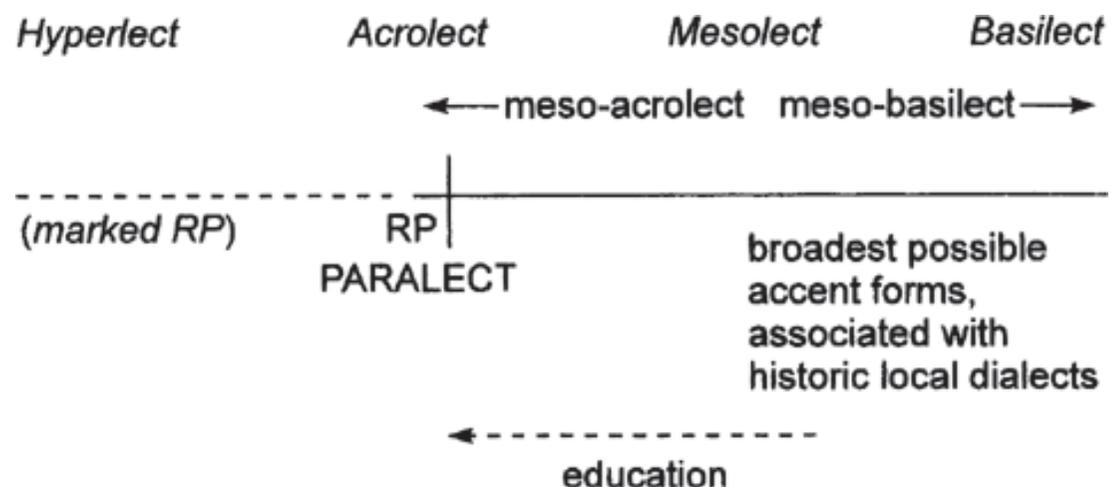
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/1080228.stm>

# John Wells's Accents of English

This classic pyramid diagram illustrates why RP is described as “*non-regional*” accent.



## 4 The accent continuum: spectrum of linguistic variation



**Hyperlect:** socially privileged marked RP accent (the “posh”)

**Paralect:** variety very close to RP but retains some nonstandard features

**Acrolect** = high prestige, standard variety

**Basilect** = the broadest form of popular speech

**Mesolect** = the speech of majority of the population

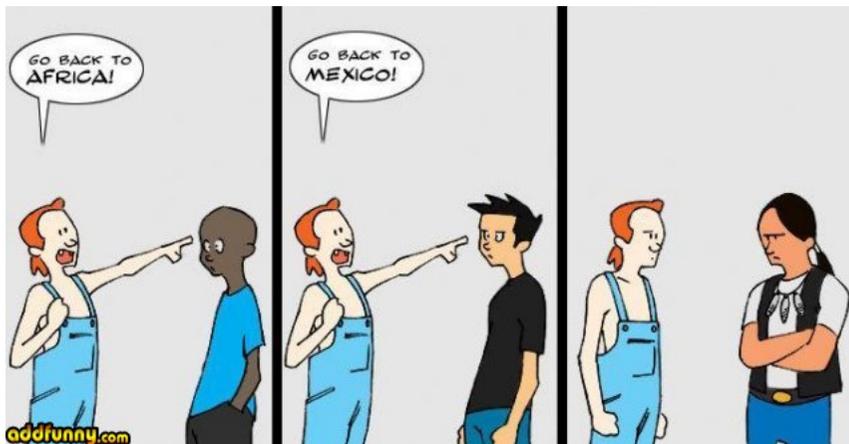
## 5 Implications of the concept of standard accent

It is difficult to determine the distinctive features of “standard”.

Some claim that there is no standard English accent and that standard English can be spoken with any accent.

Moreover, RP is changing.

**But** RP has an enormous influence as a *model* and we can't deny the existence of the “standard” version just because it is difficult to define.



**USA:** standard American English Pronunciation is described as “General American”.

Accents of certain minority groups (Hispanics, African-Americans) are often basis of *negative evaluations*.



# 6 The social significance of variation: Britain

## A hierarchy of attitudes to accents

RP

RP speakers are associated with features like intelligence, leadership, self-confidence, wealth and ambition.

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educated forms of Scottish English;  
corresponding accents of Ireland and Wales

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English provincial accents

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urban lower-class sociolects



Nonstandard speakers are associated with qualities like friendliness, kindheartedness, integrity and humor.

## 7 Contemporary accent variation

Process of *accent levelling* because of the wide spread of education and the influence of media.

Even though, large numbers of people still *cling to accents*. Why?

Different sounds encode **value systems**.

The accent and dialect involves the value system we identify with.

Many speakers use accent features to signal a *regional identity*.



Standard accents are linked with a *status* as a function of power.

Nonstandard ones with *solidarity* with a local community or with a low social class.

## 8 “Educatedness” and its alternatives

### STANDARD FORMS

- ♣ values of the mainstream of society
- ♣ standard forms are perceived as only appropriate vehicles for education.

*Congruence*: Agreement of lexical, grammatical and phonological features.

It is theoretically possible to speak *standard English* with any accent but in practice it is *never spoken in the most basilectal accents*.

Pygmalion: a Cockney flower-girl speaks **posh accent** but uses **common vocabulary**. Her speech is not *congruent*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxwfZdNrJP8>

### NONSTANDARD FORMS

- ♣ local or regional particularism
- ♣ rejection of a high regard for education
- ♣ serve as badge among adolescents, language includes attitudes

We see here a strength of alternative value-system, where the feeling of community is more important than mainstream society.

## 9 Sociosituational variation

= Variation dependent on the setting and the relationship between the speakers

Factors which determine our *choice of register* are:

- age
- sex
- socioeconomic status
- regional background
- intimacy between the speakers
- formality of the situation



### ACCOMODATION THEORY

explains how speakers *adjust* their speech in relation to the speech of their interlocutors:

- 1) *convergence* – we level out our dialect to identify with the specific community
- 2) *divergence* – we keep distance

### Did you know?

Speakers of standard varieties are suspected of mockery when they attempt to use nonstandard spoken forms.

Watch [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1mbxFsp2x0) of British politician George Osborne talking to the working man.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1mbxFsp2x0>

# 10 Areas of influence

A standard accent can *influence* your credibility or success in a job interview...

Differences in accent might be even more influential than in grammar or lexis, because they are important in *every social encounter*.



*Our range of accent flexibility is almost complete by age 17, but many people have ability to adapt their accents at much later ages!*

Why people change the way they speak? Find out more [here](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-22183566). <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-22183566>

Some people change accents to *create a particular public image*:

↻ [Margaret Thatcher](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28_0gXLKlBk) (from Lincolnshire to upper-class accent) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28\\_0gXLKlBk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28_0gXLKlBk)

↻ Tony Blair: “linguistic chameleon”

↻ David Beckham: Has he started talking posh?

Some people decide to *keep their native accents*: [Michael Caine](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBjp1oEZcwU>

[The Telegraph](#) published an article about celebrities who dropped their accents.

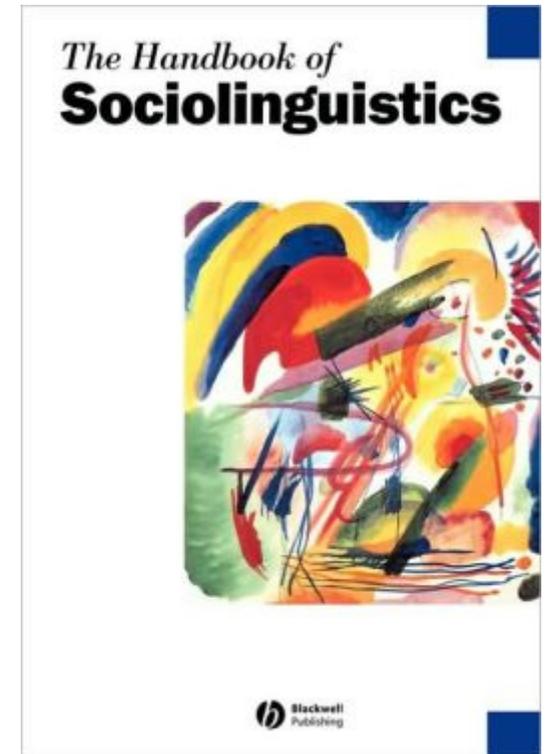
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/jobs/11165230/It-is-ok-to-change-your-accent-to-get-a-job-Here-are-nine-celebrities-who-dropped-theirs.html>



OBVIOUSLY, THE ACCENT WE USE SAYS A LOT ABOUT US BUT WE ARE FREE TO ADAPT IT.

## Sources

HONEY, JOHN. "Sociophonology." *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Coulmas, Florian (ed.). Blackwell Publishing, 1998. Blackwell Reference Online. 28 December 2007



Thank you for your attention!