

Chapter 1

Regional accent and dialect

In this chapter you will:

- Explore the ways in which language varies according to geographical region
- Consider what we mean by 'Standard English'
- Investigate the ways in which accent and dialect are presented in writing and performance

1.1 Accent and dialect

Everybody has an accent and dialect. Although you will often hear people say 'I don't really have an accent', it is actually impossible to speak without one.

Accent simply refers to the way in which we pronounce the sounds that make up our speech, often in relation to geographical region. **Dialect** is a slightly larger term which includes the way we use vocabulary and grammar as well as pronunciation. In this chapter you will look at the ways in which accents and dialects vary, how they relate to what we know as 'Standard English', and what we feel about our accents. You will also see some examples of accent and dialect being represented in different types of writing.

KEY TERMS

Accent: variation in pronunciation, often associated with a particular geographical region

Dialect: variation in words and structures associated with a particular geographical region (also includes accent)

One of the most important influences on both our accent and our dialect is where we grew up, with each area of a country having slightly different ways of saying some things than its neighbours, creating what we know as regional variation. The UK is particularly rich and diverse in this respect, so much so that people from one part of the country can find it difficult to understand people from another part of the country, despite the fact they are both speaking English! The reason for this rich diversity can be seen in the history of the UK, with various groups of people conquering and settling different parts of the islands at different times, each bringing their own language or dialect with them. English eventually emerged as the dominant language, but with a great deal of variation, depending on the linguistic influences of each region. (See *Language Change* in this series for more on how English has changed over time.)

Even when the various areas of the country were at relative peace, the lack of movement of people between areas due to limited transport or physical barriers meant that each region maintained its own way of speaking. Nowadays of course, people are free to move around the country with ease, and technology enables us to communicate and come into contact with people from all areas of the country and around the world. Yet the UK is still a country of great linguistic diversity; many people still speak differently depending on where they come from and, although there are some signs of accents and dialects levelling out in some respects, there is no indication at all that they will disappear.

Of course it's not just the UK that shows such variation – the USA also boasts a wide range of different accents and dialects. People sometimes think that there is more accent and dialect diversity in the UK than in the USA, but this isn't really the case. This misconception is probably due to the fact that variation in the UK happens over such a relatively small area compared to the vast size of the USA. It is true that there is less regional variation in countries like Australia and New Zealand, but that is perhaps to be expected, given the comparatively short and recent history of English in those countries. Variation takes time to develop, although it is likely that it won't develop so much in those countries anyway, given twenty-first-century levels of mobility and communication.

1.1.1 How do accents vary?

Certain sounds play a much greater role than others in creating variation between accents. Most variation comes from differences in vowel sounds rather than consonants, although even this is not consistent. For example, most people in the UK pronounce the vowel sound in the word 'dress' the same way no matter where they are from, whereas there is a great deal of variation in the vowel sound in the word 'goat'. Similarly, despite consonants such as 's', 'f', 'b' and 'd' being fairly consistent across all accents, other consonants such as 'k', 't' and 'h' can vary considerably.

When we discuss accents, we need a way of describing the sounds that is separate from the spelling. There are two reasons for this: firstly, unlike some languages, English spelling often does not accurately reflect English pronunciation whatever your accent (consider the word 'rough' for example) and secondly, accent variation is not normally reflected in written English, which usually follows standard conventions. Neither of these facts should come as a surprise, given that we have approximately 44 separate **phonemes** (sounds) in English, yet only 26 letters in the alphabet.

KEY TERM

Phoneme: the smallest individual unit of sound in a language which conveys a meaning, for example in 'fell' and 'well', the /f/ and /w/ sounds are phonemes

One accurate way of describing sounds is to use the symbols of the English phonemic alphabet. In this alphabet, each phoneme of English has its own symbol. This allows us to distinguish between, for example, a northern England pronunciation of 'bus' – /bʊs/ – and a southern England pronunciation – /bʌs/. When we look up a word in a dictionary, the pronunciation is given using phonemic symbols.

Although phonemic symbols provide a more accurate representation of sounds than letters do, they are still not precise. This is because there is variation even within single phonemes which they can't capture. For example, listen to the way you pronounce the /l/ sound in the words 'light' and 'cool', and notice the position of your tongue and lips for each. In most accents these will be quite different sounds, yet we only have one symbol for both of them. If we wanted to show this difference we would need to use the much more detailed resource of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), whose various symbols are able to describe all the sounds of any language. However, the phonemic symbols are usually enough to describe what we need when discussing differences between accents.

Another useful way of talking about the sounds of English and how they vary between accents is to use **lexical sets**. This is a system devised by the phonetician John Wells, who wanted a straightforward way to refer to similarities and differences between particular vowel sounds in different accents. Words are grouped together into lexical sets according to how they behave within any particular accent, and each set is represented by a keyword. For example, the keyword **kit** represents a lexical set which includes words such as 'ship', 'mist' and 'visit', all words which use the /i/ sound. We can therefore refer to /i/ as the 'kit' vowel.

KEY TERM

Lexical set: a group of words which have the same vowel sound in a given variety of English. For example, if a particular variety uses /æ/ in the word 'bath', then it will also use /æ/ in other words within the lexical set (e.g. 'path', 'graph', etc). Each set is represented by a keyword which is usually written in SMALL CAPS

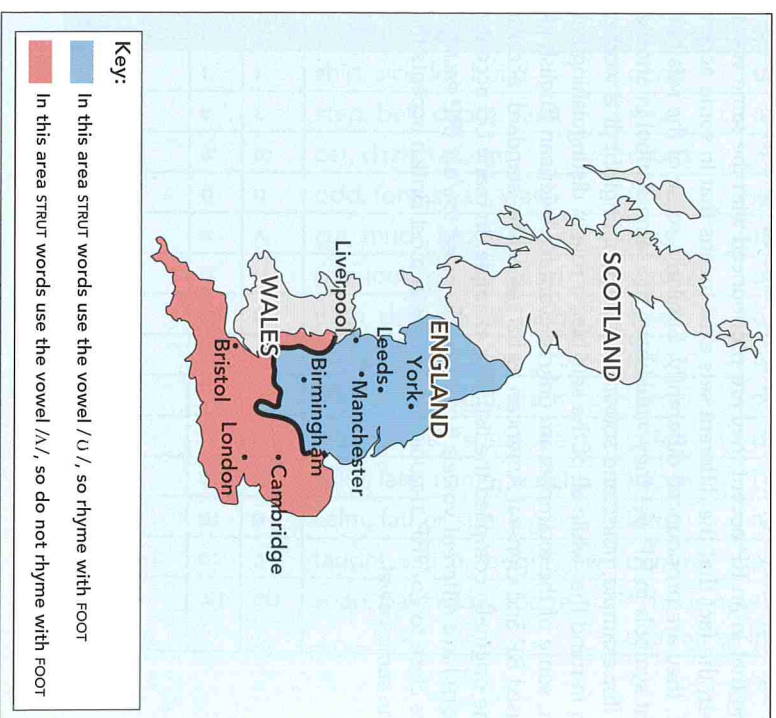
The system becomes particularly useful when describing specific accent differences, such as the variation in the word 'bus' within England. The vowel in 'bus' belongs to the lexical set **strut**, meaning that it will sound the same as the vowels in 'fun', 'must', 'come', and any other **strut** words, whatever the accent. In southern English accents, **strut** has the /ʌ/ vowel. However, in most northern English accents these words are pronounced using something close to /u/, along with other words such as 'good', 'would' and 'put'. Because the lexical set system is based on southern English vowels, /u/ is associated with the **foot** lexical set. See Table 1.1 to see how this works.

Table 1.1: **foot** and **strut** in southern and northern English accents

	STRUT cut, much, blood, touch	FOOT put, look, could, good	
Northern English accents	/kʊt, mʊtʃ, blʊd, tʊtʃ/	/pʊt, lʊk, kʊd, gʊd/	No split
Southern English accents	/kʌt, mʌtʃ, blʌd, tʌtʃ/	/pʊt, lʊk, kʊd, gʊd/	Split

Because of this separation between **strut** words ('fun', 'must', 'come') and **foot** words ('good', 'would', 'put'), we describe southern English accents as having a **foot/strut** split (i.e. the words in each of these sets are pronounced with two different vowels). On the other hand, northern English accents, which use the same vowel for both groups of words, are described as lacking a **foot/strut** split. Incidentally, the reason this is described as a 'split' is because the northern pronunciation was the original one hundreds of years ago, and the southern one represents a change that took place in which some words took on a new vowel.

Figure 1.1: The approximate border between northern and southern English uses of **foot/strut** (based on the map from Chambers and Trudgill, 1998).



The full list of lexical sets can be seen in Table 1.2, along with some example words. The phonemic symbols next to each represents the sound of the vowel in the accents known as **Received Pronunciation (RP)** or **General American (GA)**. These two accents often serve as models for teaching English, and are represented in dictionary pronunciations of words. If you would like to hear the sounds represented by the symbols, there are plenty of resources online such as the interactive phonemic charts by Macmillan.
 RP: www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6001
 GA: www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6002

KEY TERMS

Received Pronunciation (RP): an accent in English which does not indicate a person's geographical location and which is recognised as having a high social status; RP is found throughout the English-speaking world

General American (GA): The majority accent in the USA, lacking any distinctly regional characteristics. It is an imprecise term that is used in linguistics mainly for comparison purposes

As you can see, several of the sets have the same RP phonemic symbol, meaning that in an RP accent they are pronounced with the same vowel. However, the fact that the different sets exist means that in some accents at least, they are pronounced differently. Similarly, some of the sets have different symbols in RP, yet they would have the same symbol in another accent (for example, NURSE and SQUARE in Liverpool English). It is worth bearing in mind that while all of the sets play a role in distinguishing between accents, some of the examples are only relevant to American English (John Wells used RP and General American as his reference 'standard' accents when he originally compiled the list). For example, in many US accents, LOT and CLOTH have different vowels (LOT is usually close to /ɑ:/ (RP PALM) while CLOTH is close to /ɔ/ (RP THOUGHT)), whereas in most British accents they have the same vowel.

Table 1.2: A list of lexical sets and example words for Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA)

Keyword	RP	GA	Example words	Keyword	RP	GA	Example words
KIT	ɪ	ɪ	ship, sick, lift, build	GOOSE	u:	u	loop, mute, spoon, who
DRESS	e	ɛ	step, bell, death, said	PRICE	aɪ	aɪ	like, die, ice, ride
TRAP	æ	æ	cat, dash, tax, ant	CHOICE	ɔɪ	ɔɪ	noise, join, boy, void
LOT	ɒ	ɑ	odd, font, swan, wasp	MOUTH	aʊ	aʊ	out, house, count, browse
STRUT	ʌ	ʌ	cut, much, blood, touch	NEAR	ɪə	ɪr	deer, fear, here, ear
FOOT	ʊ	ʊ	put, look, could, good	SQUARE	eə	ɛr	care, pear, where, their
BATH	ɑ:	æ	path, daft, dance, laugh	START	ɑ:	ɑr	sharp, large, carve, heart
CLOTH	ɒ	ɔ	cough, broth, long, cross	NORTH	ɔ:	ɔr	for, war, short, scorch
NURSE	ɜ:	ɜr	hurt, church, girl, stern	FORCE	ɔ:	or	four, wore, porch, born
FLEECE	i:	i	creep, meet, speak, key	CURE	ʊə*	ʊr	pure, tourist, lure, sure
FACE	eɪ	eɪ	cake, late, name, weight	happy	i	i	city, busy, copy, sorry
PALM	ɑ:	ɑ	calm, father, spa, lager	letter	ə	ər	paper, centre, order, donor
THOUGHT	ɔ:	ɔ	taught, sauce, fought, jaw	comma	ə	ə	vodka, quota, panda, sofa
GOAT	əʊ	ou	soap, oak, know, rogue	*This is now quite an old-fashioned pronunciation. Most 'RP' speakers now use /ɔ:/ as in NORTH for this set.			

In addition to the differences between *foot* and *strut* described in Table 1.1, Table 1.3 shows a few of the more salient variations in British English accents.

Table 1.3: Some examples of accent differences in British English

BATH and TRAP	Separate in southern England, the same in northern England.
NURSE and SQUARE	Pronounced with the same vowel in areas of the north-west of England. Interestingly, some areas (e.g. parts of Lancashire) use the /ɜː/ vowel for both, whereas other areas (e.g. parts of Merseyside) use /ɛː/ for both.
LOT and THOUGHT	Pronounced with the same vowel in most Scottish accents, so <i>cot</i> and <i>caught</i> are homophones.
happy	Many northern English accents have /ɪ/ for the vowel at the end of these words while southern English accents tend to have /i/ or /iː/.
FACE and GOAT	Many northern English accents have long monophthongs for these words – /feːs/, /goːt/.

ACTIVITY 1.1

Your accent

Look at the words in the table of lexical sets (Table 1.2). How does your pronunciation compare to those of the RP or GA examples? Do you have any of the differences described in Table 1.3? Can you identify any other regional variations based on what you've heard on TV or in the media? For example, how do some people from Manchester (UK) typically pronounce the letter vowel?

If English is your second language, are you aware of having a British or American accent? How does your pronunciation compare to the pronunciations in Table 1.2?

In both cases it might be helpful to first listen to some recordings of example RP and GA vowels found online (e.g. www.cambridge.org/links/escdi/v6003).

Whilst it's mostly vowel sounds which vary between accents, some consonant sounds do too. Sometimes there are sounds which used to be associated with particular regional areas, but have spread to other areas. For example, **th-fronting**, where people use /f/ or /v/ for 'th' in words such as 'three' or 'brother' used to be thought of as a London feature, but now it

can be heard all over the UK. Other times there are sounds which remain very much associated with a particular region, for example the /ʌ/ sound in Liverpool English which can sound a bit like /ʊ/ in words such as 'tree' or 'ten'.

Another very important feature which distinguishes English accents is the use of **postvocalic /r/**. Postvocalic /r/ is the name given to an /r/ sound that comes after a vowel. It is there in the spelling, for example in words such as 'car' and 'park', but is not always sounded in speech. Most accents in England don't pronounce this sound, with only relatively small areas (parts of the north-west and parts of the south-west) clinging on to what used to be a widespread feature of British English. However, it is still the usual pronunciation for most Scottish, Irish and US accents of English. Accents which do pronounce the /r/ are known as **rhotic accents**.

KEY TERMS

Monophthong: a vowel which has a single sound throughout its duration. For example, the /iː/ vowel sound in the word 'sheep'

Th-fronting: the pronunciation of 'th' as /f/ or /v/. So 'think' becomes 'fink' and 'with' becomes 'wiv'

Postvocalic /r/: the /r/ sound that appears after a vowel and before a consonant ('farm') or at the end of a word ('far'). It is not pronounced in most English accents

Rhotic accent: an accent which pronounces postvocalic /r/

ACTIVITY 1.2

Accent survey

Devise a survey which will enable you to analyse different people's accents. If you are able to talk to the people face-to-face and record their speech you could simply ask them to read a list of words, or perhaps a few sentences. Make sure you have included a few examples of those words which you think are likely to vary according to accent. If you have time, you could also try to record the same people speaking more naturally in conversation (remember to ask permission and explain what the recording is for). Why do you think this might be important?

If you are not able to speak to people face-to-face, you could try devising some questions which will tell you about their accent. A good way to do this is by asking if certain words rhyme in their speech. For example:

- Do the words 'hut' and 'foot' rhyme in your speech?

- Do you pronounce the words 'fur' and 'fair' the same?
 - Do you pronounce the words 'paw' and 'pour' the same?
- When you have finished, compare the accents. Are they different? In what ways?
- If you do not have access to people who have different English accents, try to analyse videos of people speaking instead. Listen out for some keywords which you think are likely to vary. Make a note of how they are pronounced. If you don't know the phonemic symbol, or if you can't describe the difference, try to replicate the pronunciation yourself and notice what changes. For example, is your mouth more open? Is there more/less movement of your tongue?

1.1.2 Lexical variation

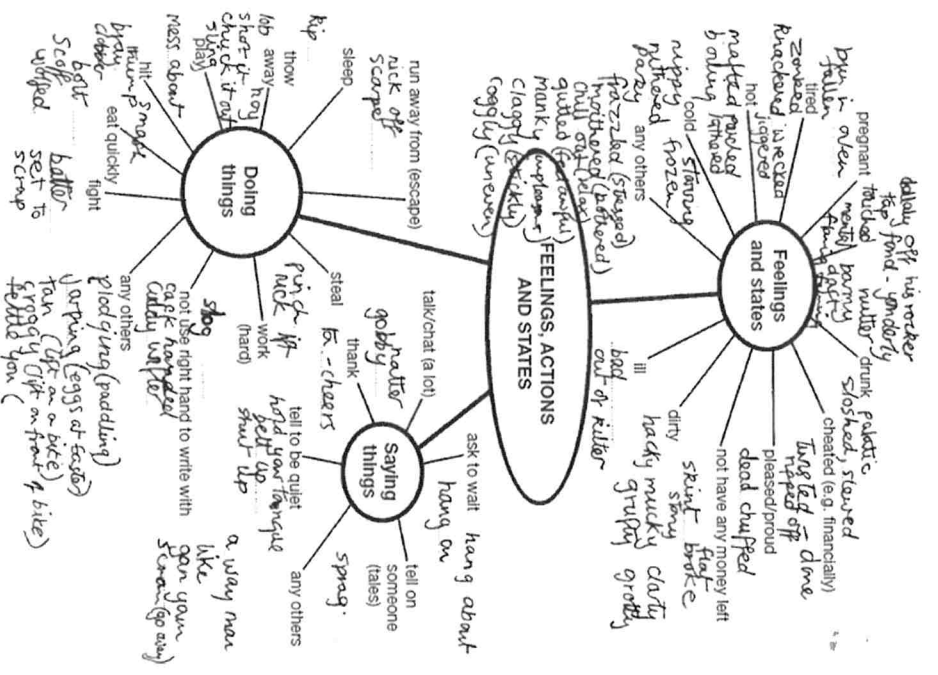
All of the examples so far have been to do with accent; however, there is also a great deal of regional dialect variation in the UK. After accent, perhaps the most noticeable differences occur at the level of lexis, with people from different areas of the country having different words for even the most everyday things. Probably the most well-known area of disagreement is the one surrounding the item pictured in Figure 1.2. Depending on where someone grew up, this could be a picture of a bread roll, a barm, a morning roll, a bap, a batch, a cob, a scuffer, a stotty, or a buttery. And what about those things on your feet – are they trainers, runners, sneakers, joggers, sandals, plimsolls, pumps, clogs, or kickers? No doubt you have a clear idea about the differences between what some of these words refer to, but the interesting thing is that these differences vary from region to region. It's not just that people from different places use different words for some things, rather that people from different places often use the same words for different things!

Figure 1.2: What do you call these?



Linguist Carmen Llamas (2007) came up with a good method of investigating lexical variation, by using Sense Relation Networks (SRNs). This approach draws on the idea that there exists a network of interconnected words and phrases in our minds. The task involves the interviewer leading the participants (this kind of research is often done in pairs) around the various semantic fields, encouraging them to discuss and explore their own dialect words and the various connotations they have. Figure 1.3 shows a completed SRN (Llamas, Mullany and Stockwell 2006). This kind of research can be very useful in uncovering patterns of lexical variation both across regions, but also across different social groups within the same region. For example, it is likely that you would get different answers from a person in their 80s than you would from a teenager, even if they grew up in the same area.

Figure 1.3: A Sense Relation Network, completed by a research participant



1.1.3 Grammatical variation

Regional variation also occurs at the level of grammar. Arthur Hughes, Peter Trudgill and Dominic Watt describe some of the differences in their book *English Accents and Dialects* (2012). This is a very useful book which they update every few years, adding new areas and additional detail each time. The examples in the book show how sometimes the grammatical differences between regional dialects can be relatively small, perhaps only consisting of a variation in the way contractions are used. For example, while southern British English accents tend to use phrases of the type: 'I haven't got it; She won't go; Doesn't he like it?', northern British English accents are more likely to use: 'I've not got it; She'll not go; Does he not like it?'

While this kind of variation is generally accepted as falling within Standard English (see below), other types of grammatical variation are more stigmatised. For example, multiple negation (e.g. 'I didn't do nothing') is certainly non-standard, as is a phrase like 'I was stood next to her', but both can be routinely heard in various regions of the UK. Here are some other common examples of non-standard grammar (adapted from Hughes, Trudgill and Watt 2012):

- **The verb to be.** Whereas Standard English follows the pattern *I was, you were, he/she/it was, we were, they were, several areas of the country* (including London) use the non-standard pattern *I was, you was, he/she/it was, we was, they was*. In complete contrast, some northern regional varieties use the pattern: *I were, you were, he/she/it were, we were, they were*. An excellent resource for seeing and hearing all sorts of regional variation is the British Library's 'Sounds familiar' website: www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6004. It even has a map of *was/were* variation with examples from around the country: www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6005.
- **African American English (AAE) habitual be.** In AAE, the sentence 'She be getting angry' does not mean 'She is getting angry (now)' but rather 'She often/regularly/is always getting angry'.
- **Present tense verb forms.** The Standard English pattern is actually quite strange, insisting on an extra 's' for third-person singular form (*he/she/it: I play, you play, she plays*, etc. Some non-standard dialects don't have this difference. For example, in East Anglia and in some Caribbean varieties of English, we get: 'She play football'; 'He want to go'; 'It make me sad'. However, in other parts of the UK, the opposite happens, with everything using 's'. In the south-west of England and south Wales for example, we might hear: 'I likes it'; 'You gives it to her'; 'We goes to the pub'.
- **Determiners.** While Standard English has 'Look at those people', various non-standard dialects use 'Look at them people'. In some Scottish dialects, both *those* and *these* can be replaced with *thae* (or *they*): 'Give me thae books'.

1.2 Standard English

Most people have a concept of some kind of a 'standard' English, the variety that is used in print, in education, and in government and legal contexts. Often it is viewed as the variety of English which is most 'correct', and therefore the variety which is 'better' than any other varieties. Linguists don't see it this way. Yes, there is a recognised standard variety of English, but this variety is simply another dialect, no better or worse than any other dialect of English. Its 'standardness' comes from status rather than quality, and this status was itself acquired indirectly through accidents of history. The truth is, as in all languages, the prestige variety is the variety associated with whoever happens to have the power in any given society. The power in the UK, at least since the eleventh century, has centred in and around London; therefore, it was the variety of English that emerged in that region of the country that came to be seen as the most prestigious. This is then the variety that became standardised and reinforced through the process of printing and publishing, thereby making all other varieties by definition 'non-standard'.

But even a standard variety of a language is not fixed, and people continually argue over what is and isn't acceptable. Some people imagine that there exists somewhere an organisation or committee that decides what is or isn't 'correct' English (France actually has the *Académie Française* for this purpose, although its role is largely symbolic). But in reality, the 'rules' of Standard English are created by the grammarians who publish the books, and while these days there is much more interest in how language is *actually* used (a *descriptive* approach), in the past there was much more emphasis on how language *should* be used (a *prescriptive* approach). The only problem was, different authors often had very different ideas as to what was or wasn't acceptable, resulting in a whole lot of contradictory 'rules', some of which are still causing confusion today.

KEY TERMS

Descriptivism: an approach to language study that focuses on how language is actually used

Prescriptivism: an approach to language study that focuses on rules and notions of correctness

It is actually very easy to illustrate why we shouldn't think of Standard English as being any better than all the other non-standard dialects. The fact is, from a purely linguistic perspective, various non-standard dialects are actually more sophisticated than the standard. For example, unlike many other languages, Standard English has no way of differentiating between singular and plural second-person personal pronouns: 'Where have you been?' could be referring to one person or several. However, various non-standard dialects do have the

distinction: using ‘Where have *you*se been?’ refers to more than one person. Non-standard, but definitely not sub-standard.

In a lecture organised by Cambridge University Press (2012), linguist David Crystal had this to say about Standard English:

Standard English is the minority dialect, always has been. Perhaps 1% of the English speakers of the world use Standard English. I should say of course English writers of the world because Standard English is essentially the dialect of the written language, defined as you know by its grammar, by its spelling, and its punctuation, and to a minor extent by vocabulary as well. If people say ‘What is Standard English?’ we give examples, and there are dozens of them like: in Standard English we don’t use double negatives, for example. Nobody in Standard English says ‘I haven’t got nothing’....

But that written language, that written definition of standard is still only a minority of the overall English language use in the world. Nobody’s got any real statistics of course, but how many people speak Standard English in that way? I’m doing my best at the moment, and indeed you will hear Standard English spoken on the most public of occasions and that’s why everybody gets the impression that it’s universal. But in actual fact perhaps only 5% at most of the spoken English around the world is going to be Standard English.

Most people speak a mixture of Standard English and some kind of local dialect, but the precise make-up and balance of that mixture is influenced by all sorts of social factors. Location (region), social class, level of education, occupation, age and gender all play a role in determining how close to the standard our language might be. Perhaps the most important influencing factor is the context in which we are speaking – who we are speaking to and for what purpose.

So far, we have looked at the idea of Standard English in relation to dialect, but what about accent? The closest we have to a Standard English accent is Received Pronunciation (RP). Although historically it has its origins in the speech of the areas around London, RP is an accent of prestige and higher social position rather than of any particular region. It is the model used in the teaching of English as a second language, and is the accent often associated with BBC newscasters and the Queen (‘BBC English’ and ‘The Queen’s English’ are sometimes used informally as alternative terms for RP). However, RP has changed over the years; just listen to clips of BBC newscasters from the 1950s to get an idea of how much. In fact, even the Queen’s accent has altered over time.

Linguist Jonathan Harrington has tracked changes in various aspects of the Queen’s accent by analysing her recorded Christmas speeches over a 50-year period, concluding that certain aspects of her speech have moved towards a more general southern British English variety. This BBC story – ‘Has the Queen become frightfully common?’ discusses some of Harrington’s findings, and

provides some videos of the Queen for comparison: www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6006.

Although RP is changing, its value as a pronunciation model for people learning English is not really in any doubt, as long as dictionaries and teaching materials reflect those changes as they occur. After all, it wouldn’t really be fair to teach people in 2017 to speak in the RP accent of the Queen in the 1950s! However, similar to the idea of a Standard English dialect discussed earlier, RP should not be thought of as being any ‘better’ than any other accent – it is simply the standardised model of pronunciation that has emerged as a result of historical chance. If York (a city in the north-east of England) happened to be the capital of the country rather than London (in south-east England), there is every likelihood that the prestige accent of England would be very different. There would likely be no FOOT/STRUT split for a start!

When we talk of prestige in relation to the idea of a standard dialect or model of pronunciation, we are referring to what’s known as **overt prestige**. Overt prestige comes from the acceptance of this or that (standard) variety as being valued and accepted in a particular society. On the other hand, a non-standard variety might have **covert prestige**, meaning that despite possibly being stigmatised in wider society, it is valued for other reasons within smaller social groups of people. Often this positive evaluation is unconscious, with people claiming not to use such a variety when asked. Gerard Van Herk, a sociolinguist, defines the two types of prestige in this way:

Overt prestige: positive or negative assessments of variants that are in line with the dominant norms associated with sounding ‘proper’ and that people are aware of, often coinciding with the norms of the media, educational institutions, or higher socio-economic classes.

Covert prestige: a norm or target the speakers unconsciously orient to, with a sort of hidden positive evaluation that speakers give to other (presumably non-standard) forms. The linguistic equivalent of *street credibility*. (Van Herk 2012)

KEY TERMS

Overt prestige: the obvious prestige associated with the use of the standard variety of a language within a particular society. Connected to notions of speaking ‘properly’

Covert prestige: the less obvious or hidden prestige associated with the use of certain non-standard varieties of a language within particular social groups. Van Herk (2012: 55) calls it ‘the linguistic equivalent of *street credibility*’

1.3 Accent loss and maintenance

Stories frequently appear in the media about UK accents and dialects disappearing, concluding that soon we are all going to sound the same. This process of **dialect levelling** certainly does occur, but the outcome is perhaps not so inevitable as some of the stories suggest. The fact is that while some linguistic features may gradually disappear from a particular location and be replaced by more widespread variants, other features remain firmly in place. More than this, at the same time as linguists are tracking how various items seem to be being used less and less, it is undoubtedly the case that new ways of speaking are emerging (usually among young people), which may in time prove to be just as region-specific.

KEY TERM

Dialect levelling: the process by which language forms of different parts of the country converge and become more similar over time, with the loss of regional features and reduced diversity of language

One of the reasons that regional variation persists is the role such variation plays in our own sense of identity. Our language, particularly the way we speak, is a big part of who we are and how we are perceived by others. It therefore makes sense that if somebody has a strong sense of regional identity, then this will be displayed in their speech. Some linguists see our speech as reflecting our identities: for example, a person speaks this way because she is a teenager from Derby. However, more recent thinking suggests that language is just another way in which we 'perform' our identities: a person creates a 'teenage' and 'Derby' identity through the way they speak, in the same way as they might perform their affiliation to a particular social group through the way they dress and the music they listen to, in addition to the language they use.

Thinking of language and identity in this way helps us to understand why it is that we often change the way we speak depending on who we are interacting with. Most of us are fully aware of the fact that we usually speak differently to our friends than we would to a teacher for example, but what about if we find ourselves speaking to people with whom we don't share an accent? For many people the first time this happens is when we go away to university or get a job in another part of the country. In these situations it is normal to suddenly feel very aware of our regional accent, and other people may comment on the way we speak. What often happens is that we then soften our accent slightly, perhaps in order to be understood more clearly, perhaps in order to fit in. But then when we next go home, we immediately slip back into our old way of speaking. In each situation, we are using language as a way of performing and

maintaining our particular individual and group identities, and geographical region can often play a big part in this.

1.4 Accent and dialect in print and performance

Eye dialect is the term given to writing which uses non-standard spelling in order to portray non-standard (often regional) accents and dialects. You can find it in all sorts of writing, from novels, to poems, to cartoons, and when done well, the effect can be very striking. In this section we are going to look at some examples from a variety of sources.

KEY TERM

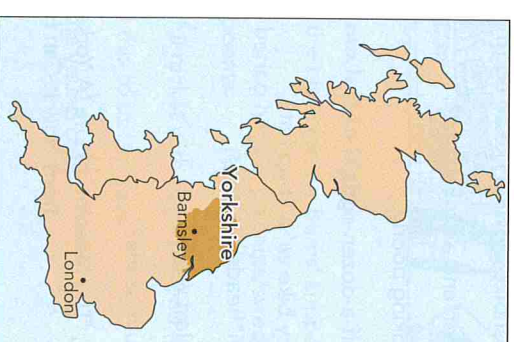
Eye dialect: the deliberate use of misspellings to identify a speaker who is using a regional or non-standard form of English. So called because we see rather than hear the difference

1.4.1 Written texts

Poetry

Ian McMillan is a poet from Barnsley in Yorkshire. He speaks with a strong local accent, and his writing, especially when it is about Yorkshire life, reflects this.

Figure 1.4



Text 1A

From under't canal like a watter-filled cellar
 coming up like a pitman from a double'un, twice.
 I said "Hey, you're looking poorly"
 He said "Them nights are drawing in"
 Down't stairs like a gob-machine, sucking toffees,
 up a ladder like a ferret up a ladder in a fog,
 I said "Hey, you're looking poorly"
 He said "Half-a-dozen eggs"
 Over't top in't double-decker groaning like a whippet
 like a lamplighter's daughter in a barrel full of milk,
 I said "Hey, you're looking poorly"
 He said "Night's a dozen eggs"
 Down't canal like a barrow full of Gillis's parsnips,
 coming up like a cage of men in lit-up shiny hats,
 I said "Hey, you're looking poorly"
 He said "Half a dozen nights"
 Under't canal on a pushbike glowing like an eggshell
 up a ladder wi' a pigeon and a broken neck,
 I said "Hey, you're looking poorly"
 He said "I feel like half-a-dozen eggs"
 Over't night on a shiny bike wi' a lit-up hat,
 perfect for't poorly wi' heads like eggs,
 I said "Hey, you died last week"
 He said "Aye, did you miss me?"
 Ian McMillan, 'The Meaning of Life (A Yorkshire Dialect Rhapsody)'
 from *Now It Can Be Told* (Carcanet, 1983)

ACTIVITY 1.3

Writing in your own accent

How does the accent represented in Text 1A deviate from RP, or from your own accent? If your accent is different, how would you use spellings to represent these and other words to match the way you speak? If you are from Barnsley yourself, or know somebody who is, how accurate do you think this representation of the accent is?

Look online for some more examples of dialect poetry – or write a poem of your own!

Comic strips

The Broons and *Oor Wullie* are comic strips which appear in the Scottish newspaper *The Sunday Post*. Both are written in local Scottish dialect, based on that of a fictitious Scottish industrial town.

Look at Text 1B (from *The Broons*) and Text 1C (from *Oor Wullie*). Notice how the writing is a mixture of accent spellings (e.g. 'oor') and dialect spellings (e.g. 'neeps', meaning parsnips/swedes).

Text 1B



Transliteration (from left to right)

The haggis is set on the table for our Burns' supper.

Oh, not that again – boring haggis, parsnips/swedes* and potatoes. And you all reciting daft poems.

And making that awful racket with bagpipes and fiddles.

It's not fair – you did this to us last year.

I think we're losing the young ones.

It's time we took a thought to ourselves [it's time we had a think/thought about it]

Yes, we could make some small changes.

I'm up for it. What do you have in mind?

*Interestingly, there is another dialect difference here, as the two vegetables are named in the opposite way to each other in many English and Scottish dialects!

The Broons, *The Sunday Post*, 22 January 2017

Text 1C



Transliteration

In Rio, far from Scotland's cold, our warrior brought home the gold.

Oor Wullie, *The Sunday Post*, 22 January 2017

Stories and novels

American novelist Thomas Wolfe wrote the (very) short story 'Only the Dead Know Brooklyn' in 1935 (Text 1D). It's not so much a story as a sketch, a slice of life in the form of a narrated conversation about Brooklyn, New York, between two men on a train. What makes it special however, is that it's written entirely in 'Brooklynese' from that period. (The underlined words are explained in the glossary.)

Text 1D

Dere's no guy livin' dat knows Brooklyn t'roo an' t'roo, because it'd take a guy a lifetime just to find his way aroun' duh goddam town.

So like I say, I'm waitin' for my train t' come when I sees dis big guy standin' deh—dis is duh foist I evah see of him. Well, he's lookin' wild, y'know, an' I can see dat he's had plenty, but still he's holdin' it; he talks good an' is walkin' straight enough. So den, dis big guy steps up to a little guy dat's standin' deh, an' says, "How d'yuh get t' Eighteen^t Avenoo an' Sixty-sevent' Street?" he says.

"Jesus! Yuh got me, chief," duh little guy says to him. "I ain't been heah long myself. Where is duh place?" he says. "Out in duh Flatbush section somewhere?"

"Nah," duh big guy says. "It's out in Bensenhoist. But I was neveh deh befoeh. How d'yuh get deh?"

"Jesus," duh little guy says, scratchin' his head, y'know—yuh could see duh little guy didn't know his way about—"yuh got me, chief. I neveh hold of it. Do any of youse guys know where it is?" he says to me.

"Sure," I says. "It's out in Bensenhoist. Yuh take duh Four^t Avenoo express, get off at Fifty-nint^t Street, change to a Sea Beach local deh, get off at Eighteen^t Avenoo an' Sixty-toid, an' den walk down foeh blocks. Dat's all yuh got to do," I says.

Thomas Wolfe, 'Only the Dead Know Brooklyn', *The New Yorker*, 15 June 1935

Glossary

t'roo an' t'roo	through and through
deh	there
foist	first
heah	here
hold	heard
foeh	four

1.4.2 Spoken text

Songs and lyrics

The vast majority of popular music is performed using some kind of generic American English accent. It's not entirely clear why this should be the case, but it's probably a combination of two factors, one social, one phonetic. Socially, there is a sense that singers are using the style that suits the music – pop and rock music, with its roots in American Blues and Rock 'n' Roll, has always been sung in that way. Singers are therefore continuing a tradition, or abiding by the (unwritten) rules of the genre. Phonetically, there is an argument that the process of singing tends to reduce or remove the various qualities of speech that make up an accent (vowel quality, rhythm, intonation), leaving a neutral accent that just happens to sound American. David Crystal discusses these influences on his blog: www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6007. There is also an interesting short video on the subject from *Slate* magazine, 'Why Do British Singers Sound American. Like Adele on "Skyfall"?': www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6008.

Of course there have always been exceptions, especially when part of the singer's or group's identity is deliberately tied to a specific region. Some recent (and not so recent) examples include Lily Allen (London), Madness (London), Arctic Monkeys (Sheffield), Kasabian (Leicester) and Sleaford Mods (Nottingham/Lincolnshire). However, there appears to be something of a surge in regional accent performance, at least in one particular genre: grime. Grime is a style of music that grew out of early 2000s East London. Whilst there are similarities to hip hop (both styles involve rapping), grime has its roots in different styles of music such as garage, bashment and dancehall. Although grime artists all tend to perform in something close to Multicultural London English (see Chapter 3), it is undoubtedly the case that certain regional accent and dialect features are retained in the performance of certain non-London artists. Two high-profile examples are Bugzy Malone from Manchester and Lady Leshurr from Birmingham. And for Lady Leshurr at least, it is a conscious decision to use her own accent. Speaking in an interview with *Dazed and Confused* magazine in 2016, she said: 'People used to diss my accent and I got insecure and stopped using it. But I just woke up one day and thought, "What are you doing Leesh? You're from Birmingham, you shouldn't have to hide your accent because of other people"'. www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6009.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Regional accent in music

Try to find some more examples of singers/rappers/groups who use their own regional accents in their performances. What is it precisely that makes it noticeable? Is it a particular vowel sound? Is it consistent

throughout their tracks? Why do you think they are doing this? Is it making a statement about regional identity?

Alternatively, look at some artists from other countries who perform in English. Do they tend to use an American accent or another type of accent? Why do you think this is?

In this chapter you have seen what it is that actually varies when we talk about regional accent and dialect variation, and how we can best describe these differences. You also now have some ideas and techniques for investigating the differences yourself. You have been introduced to the notion of Standard English, suggesting that its position of prestige, along with RP, is nothing to do with any linguistic superiority. You touched upon the role which regional accent and dialect play in making us who we are, before finally looking at some of the ways in which accent and dialect are portrayed in writing and music. In the next chapter you will look further into how language is used and how it varies in relation to the social groups we belong to and identity with.

Wider reading

You can find out more about the topics in this chapter by reading or listening to the following:

- Fry, S. (2008–17). *Fry's English Delight*, series on BBC Radio 4: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00lv1k1/episodes/player
- Hughes, A., Trudgill, P. and Watt, D. (2012) *English Accents and Dialects* (Fifth edition). London: Routledge.
- Kamm, O. (2015) *Accidence Will Happen: The Non-Pedantic Guide to English Usage*. London: Orion Publishing.
- Trudgill, P. (1999) *The Dialects of England* (Second edition). Oxford: Blackwell.