

In the 20th century the idea of a standard British accent used by educated men and women was often referred to as Received Pronunciation (RP). This is popularly known as BBC English, Oxford English, or the Queen's English. It was typical of the language used by BBC Radio 4 news announcers in the post-war period. In the 21st century there is increasing acceptance of regional accents in public broadcasting.

Dialects of English

If you travel around the UK, you will encounter a wide range of regional accents and dialects; some of these are barely comprehensible to native English speakers. They include both written and spoken variations.

Every region of the UK has its own distinct dialects, but we can only list here a few dialects with one or two examples of dialect words.

Cockney – from the East End of London. It is famous for the rhyming slang (“apples and pears” for “stairs”, or “dog and bone” for “telephone”).



People born within the sound of the bells of St Mary-le-Bow church in London are considered to be the “true” Cockneys.

Estuary English – spoken in the South-East (“souff” for “south” or “awright” for “all right”).

Lancashire – spoken in the county of Lancashire (“butty” for “sandwich” or “tarra” for “goodbye”).

Yorkshire – still influenced by Old English / Scandinavian (“to fettle” is “to make”, “nowt” means “nothing”).

Scotland – in Scotland you can hear many words different from English (“wee” stands for “small”, “bairn” for “child”).

Geordie – a dialect of Tyneside (Newcastle Upon Tyne); (“burn” means “stream”).

Scouse – a dialect spoken in Liverpool and made famous by the Beatles differs as much in its pronunciation as in the vocabulary (“bredren” means “friend”, “scally” is “disreputable person”).

The UK also has a high proportion of speakers of immigrant languages, up to 14 per cent in parts of London. Some of the ethnic languages spoken in the UK are: Bengali, Turkish, Greek, Italian, Chinese, Punjabi and Gujarati.

English pidgins and creoles

A pidgin is a simplified language not learnt as a mother tongue, but formed to communicate between speakers of mutually unintelligible languages.

A creole is a language with its own grammar, structure and vocabulary.

A creole may develop from a pidgin when it becomes the mother tongue. As examples, English pidgins are spoken in Papua New Guinea (Tok Pisin) and creoles in Jamaica. Caribbean immigrants in the UK still speak a language influenced by Jamaican Creole. For example, they may say “big-eye” for “greedy” or “sabi” instead of “wise”.