



STYLISTIC CHANGES IN ENGLISH TODAY - A DRIFT FROM THE 'QUEEN'S ENGLISH'**Dr. Anindita Dutta**Department of English
The Neotia University, Indiadoi: [10.33329/elt.12.4.13](https://doi.org/10.33329/elt.12.4.13)**ABSTRACT**

The English language has its varieties and dialects as any other standard language. With its varying accents and dialects, English is now a global language, a lingua franca, used by almost 1.5 billion people the world over. There was a time when the *Queen's English* was synonymous to the BBC English or Oxford English. This style of English called for a flawless English pronunciation that represented a style and accent of the reigning British monarch. This also came to be known as Received Pronunciation or RP. With English becoming a global language in a diverse, multi-cultural world and with the internet influencing our stylistic development every day, have we been able to retain the original unadulterated style of the *Queen's English*? How many of us follow and speak the perfect *Queen's English* even today? How many of the young royals maintain the flawless style of their predecessor? The article throws light upon this very interesting aspect of how the 21st century has played a significant role in drifting away from the perfect pronunciation and style of the *Queen's English*. The influence of radio and television has nonetheless been huge and impactful in this regard. The English that we speak today has shifted gradually from the Received Pronunciation to Estuary English and beyond.

Keywords: Queen's English, RP, Estuary English, globalisation, drift, BBC

Introduction

"Throughout the history of English there has been a contest between the forces of standardization and the forces of localization at both the written and the spoken levels". When Queen Victoria ascended the throne of England, the concept of 'The Queen's English' was realized. It referred to a spoken form of Standard English.

The generation of youngsters who grew up learning English in the 1960s, 70s, 80s are familiar with terms such as the *Queen's English* or the *King's English* signifying a perfect form of English that alluded to a way of pronunciation used by a reigning British monarch and were primarily considered to be error-free and slang-free. The acceptability of varied English pronunciations, characteristic of a particular country, region or culture was unheard of then. The *Queen's English* was something that teachers and students of English usually idolized, looked up to and tried to acquire.

This notion of *Queen's English* or *King's English* usually applied to error-free pronunciation of English words. To make it simpler, the literal meaning of the *Queen's English* referred to the way a reigning British

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monarch pronounced English words. Since the English Language originated in England, Standard English represented a correct form of English as spoken and written in England. This error free English came to be known as the *King's English* or the *Queen's English* according to the gender of the British Sovereign. If England was governed by a King, then the standard correct English would be the King's English whereas if governed by a Queen, it would be the Queen's English.

What does Queen's English signify

The *Queen's English* has also been referred to as BBC English or Oxford English. This standard English mostly associated with native speakers from UK includes Received Pronunciation or RP for short, and stood for the 'sophisticated, posh' accent the Queen of England used. The concept of RP began almost 250 years ago in England, as the accent of the cultured classes in courts, churches and universities. This accent of the 'educated Britons' was chosen by Lord Reith, when he founded the BBC. He chose this accent because he thought the accent would be easily understandable to most people in the UK.

The influence of Television and Radio

The accent used by broadcasters in the 1950s mostly imitated the Queen's accent; today, however, regional accents heard on television and radio, make programmes much more popular and likeable to the masses. These changes significantly effected English pronunciation as people tended to subconsciously mirror each other's speeches and gestures.

With time, the English Language did not remain confined to England. English spread its wings far and wide, beyond the geographical boundaries of England. It began to be used the world over and consequently the very concept of King's English or Queen's English gradually became less and less relevant. As Prof. David Crystal has rightly pointed out, "*The idea of Queen's English implies that the queen owns English. But, of course, nobody owns English any more, least of all the queen.*"

The gradual change in the Queen's pronunciation

In fact, in the later part of her reign, the queen's pronunciation did not show much differences from her earlier speeches, made some 50 years ago. The Queen continued to speak the same kind of English on all formal occasions during her reigning years. Nevertheless, Queen Elizabeth II's change in style and pronunciation was gradual and subtle. Professor Jonathan Harrington, a phonetics expert at the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich, researched on the Queen's accent and opined that the change in the Queen's pronunciation probably occurred subconsciously. It may have been that the Queen's sophisticated, upper-class accent had become more 'mainstream' as the people around her changed through the years. This is a reflection of how language is 'live' and can constantly change with the times. Phoneticians, have researched into the Queen's 35 Christmas broadcasts from the past 60 years and pointed out that although her grammar and vocabulary remain as precise as early in her reign but her pronunciation of certain words have gradually changed. According to researchers, the different recordings of her voice reflect how accents evolve over time, and how one may be influenced by social, cultural and technological developments. For instance, the way the Queen pronounced "family" was phonetically more like "fem-e-leh" in 1957, but towards the end of her reign she sounded more like "fam-e-lee". Similarly, the way she pronounced the word "lost" has changed from "lawst" to "lost". King Charles carries this trait of his mother. It is quite natural and not at all surprising that King Charles adopts a colloquial style off-duty. That is common for all of us. None of us use a single accent. Rather we use multiple accents depending on situations, occasions, the people around us and circumstances.



The Queen's English and the young royals

There is yet another interesting question that strikes us here. Do the younger members of the royal family of England continue to speak the 'Queen's English'? The answer is no. Queen Elizabeth's grandsons, Prince William and Prince Harry, for example, have accents that are far closer to Estuary English than their father's or grandmother's. In recent years, Estuary English has been adopted by many upper- and middle-class people that gives them a slight accent, while still using standard grammar. The younger royals have picked up the characteristics of Demotic English, the English that is used by the common people, and unlike the royals the younger generation often use Estuary English, common in the southeast of England. Estuary English is now emerging as a standard accent of England. Estuary English is characterised by slang words and phrases and a distinct pronunciation. Estuary English tend to drop the *t*, for example, 'going to' becomes *gonna*, 'want to' becomes 'wanna'. These features are common in modern speech and this is how the younger members of the royal family prefer to speak in informal situations. In formal occasions however, they are more conscious and articulate formally so that their public image is not tarnished.

How far have the diverse accents been accepted in Britain? How far has the British English pronunciation become Americanised in the last few decades? The influence has been quite remarkable. For example, *schedule* is pronounced as *skedule* in American English, *got* as *gotten*, *mobile phone* as *cellphone*. The word *dance* in American English is pronounced with a short *ae* sound as in 'cat', while in British English *dance* is pronounced with a long *a:/* sound as in 'father'. Traditional British English pronunciation is not only effected by American English pronunciation but by pronunciation and dialects of all kinds. At present, one and a half a billion people in the world speak English and only a few hundred thousand speak RP. Surprisingly, three out of four speakers of English in the world today have an American accent or an Australian accent or a South African accent or any other accent and the list goes on and on.

The internet has brought about a linguistic revolution in new styles of language use that is largely influenced by technology. In addition to this, the effects of globalisation are large and diverse. The netizens have developed their own lexicon and style. Text messages and whatsapp messages have shrunken the English vocabulary and the younger generation prefer not to write full sentences anymore. Swearing is no more uncensored now, quite sanctioned on daily soaps, web-series and movies on OTT platforms. This was unthinkable by the BBC even a few decades ago, for the English produced by the BBC in radio and television alongside the Queen's was considered to be the epitome of correctness.

Conclusion

Gone are the days when the 'BBC accent' represented the Queen's English. The year 2023 witnessed the accession of King Charles III to the throne of England but owing to social mobility, and rapid globalisation, the 'BBC accent' has changed dramatically. Today the BBC itself comprises of a variety of regional accents that are neither Received pronunciation nor the accent of the English nobility of the 20th century. As we glide towards the first quarter of the 21st century, we understand that English accents and pronunciations are becoming global, diverse, universal with regional varieties of English and mother tongue influences (MTI) taking over and becoming pre-dominant. Nevertheless, irrespective of the diverse styles, what remains vital is the clarity in communication. Where there is a strong desire to put forward an idea, an opinion, a piece of information, a message that carries our thoughts must remain unobscured by any form of accent. Accents may change with the times but irrespective of the style and pronunciation, the English we use must be comprehensible, relatable and carry the true essence of the message.

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