English as it is spoke

When even the Queen doesn't speak Queen's English, what is happening to our language?

Special report: what is Britain?

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So the queen speaks estuary English. I can't honestly say that I'd noticed, but then, I wasn't around in her more clipped Celia Johnson days. But now you come to mention it, although she's not quite Jamie Oliver, there is a certain mellowing of her vowel sounds. Why should one be surprised? Standard pronunciation across the country has also changed.

Furthermore, the age of deference is dead, so where once broadcasters, opinion-makers and other more vocal setters of the spoken word aped the accents of the court, now the remnants of the class élite are sinking into the speech patterns of the people. Language is nothing if not a social tool; as society changes so must speech change with it.

There are precedents or pertinent analogies. In the nineteenth century, before the coming of the railways, time was not regularised throughout the country, but rather each major town set its own time, determined each day by setting the town's clock-hands to 12 when the sun was at its highest.

But obviously, once there were trains and, therefore, train timetables, there needed to be a consistent, standardised time throughout the land. We would surely find it curious to live now in a country divided into different time zones. Is the consternation voiced now at the erosion of our once-various accents any more logical?

For it is patently the case that as the telegraph and the train set a standard for time, so television has set a standard for speech. Much as people may baulk at the influence of the
metropolitan élite (which, while it may not be a social élite in the class sense, is certainly a geographical élite), it isn't surprising that a form of London accent has prevailed. This is a small country and a far more centralised one than any other in Europe and certainly far more so than America.

The type of estuary English that most broadcasters (certainly most broadcasters under 40) speak has become the vernacular of the age. It isn't a case of a widespread adoption of mockney, or symptomatic necessarily of what are taken to be the inverted snobbery and anxiously democratising principles of the age, but a reflection of the obvious powers of mass communication. In much the same way, many children's speech patterns now betray a certain transatlantic twang; after all, most of the linguistic influences they receive are through American television programmes.

But what is so wrong with a democratising principle governing our speech habits? Why do we hold so nervously to our old, class-defining patterns and accents? Of course there are casualties, though I don't say this in a spirit of self-pity. When I was a child, my accent, for example, was Received Pronunciation; now I am given to understand it is posh. I can live with that.

To change one's accent consciously would be the act of a phoney and shifts in pronunciation are piecemeal rather than the product the sort of Meryl Streep-like virtuosity brought about by a dialogue coach. What it means simply is that what constitutes RP is different.

Furthermore, if we feel that a standardised spoken language is against natural laws, we should also remember that the notion of standardised spelling is relatively recent. The age of mass literacy required a shared system of spelling, brought about by the power of the public prints, and we would find it as odd to return to an age that dispensed with this as we would to adopt the jumble of timescales that once unquestioningly pertained.

But as with all change, the shift in speech patterns is hardly sudden. For all that the Australian linguists have only recently offered their apparently inflammatory breakdown of the monarchical tongue, it was many years ago that John Honey made just such claims in Does Accent Matter? (Faber 1989), a book that investigated the history, influence and susceptibilities of accent.

Not only should Does Accent Matter? never have been allowed to go out of print, but it should be used as part of illuminating textual analysis in every school in the country. Among many other cases, John Honey recorded the shifts in the accent in which Princess Diana spoke in the first 10 years
of her public reign, for want of a better word.

It might sound vehemently anti-democratic to site (or cite) confirmation of language change by concentrating on the evolving accents of the royals, but it is pertinent, nevertheless. If the idea of a shared accent makes any sense, it has to be shared by all levels of society.

For whatever reason, we do not have the ability of, for example, the Germans, who find it seamlessly easy to speak in their native dialect at home and in standard hochdeutsch in public. We are not nearly so versatile and therefore need to accept that our language will reflect that.

If the only reason that we want variety in speech is to hold on to the old prejudices, then we are truly better off with an impoverished system. The fact that the royal family, voluntarily or not, have become part of our linguistic reductionism does not in itself make it either a good or a bad thing. But surely what colours our judgment is what the change, or changes, do away with, namely, precise stratification and instant labelling.

No one can be naive enough to believe that a standardised spoken language denotes a truly egalitarian age - and I can see the argument that it props up a hidden and even more subtle classification - but it is most definitely a prerequisite of it.