

FILLING THE LABEL: ESTUARY ENGLISH AS A NEW FORM OF PRONUNCIATION

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Clearly, the term “Estuary English” has over time
become “all things to all people.”
Joanna Przedlacka, 2002

Estuary English has been a widespread topic of debate in the last decades, both in academic and public settings. As a consequence, the label “Estuary English” has never been clearly defined, and this has created a kind of ambiguity about what is Estuary English. In this article we intend to clarify this phenomenon, by looking both at its linguistic category and its geographical location—as well as on the sociolinguistic parameters of this new variety, such as the reasons why it has spread and its speakers.

1. WHAT IS ESTUARY ENGLISH?

The last decades of the 20th century have been characterised by debates about language change. Among the new varieties named, Estuary English¹ has been highlighted. Nevertheless, Wells (1997) states that “EE is a new name. But it is not a new phenomenon”. EE is part of an ongoing trend which entails “features of popular London speech to spread out geographically and socially”. Therefore, we can say that language is permanently changing although modifications may be more or less perceptible depending on the period of time in which they occur.

In the first half of the 20th century, Gimson (1980: 85) classified RP into three categories; i.e. “Conservative RP”, “General RP” and “Advanced RP”. We could then foresee this new phenomenon, as Advanced RP was distinguished as a variety characterised by changes which were taking place within RP.

EE was first mentioned by David Rosewarne in 1984 in his article “Estuary English” published in the *Times Educational Supplement*. He had observed that

¹ From now on, we will use “EE” instead of “Estuary English”

varieties in the middle ground between RP and Cockney had never been defined. Moreover, British accents were being “levelled”. Hence, he defined EE as “a variety of modified regional speech”, placed in “a continuum with RP and London speech at either end”.

After Rosewarne’s article, an academic and public debate about EE began. From then on, several authors tried to define what EE was. Among the most prominent linguists who studied EE we can find Paul Coggle, whose definition does not vary significantly from Rosewarne’s or Antonio Lillo’s² one. Taking into account their description of EE, and Gimson’s classification of RP, we can clarify EE’s location in the accent continuum with the following diagram. According to this graphic, EE would be then a new variety placed between two consolidated ones.

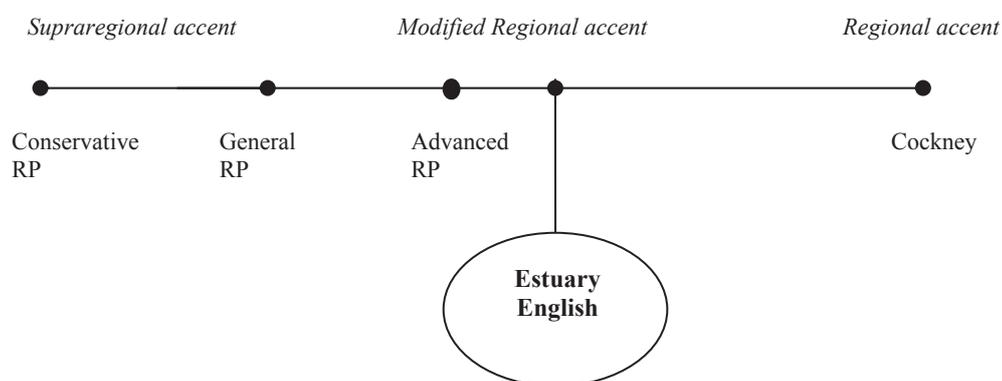


Diagram 1. Modified diagram from Lillo 1999: 66.

Nevertheless, the EE phenomenon is still under debate, and, thus, there are other scholars who say that EE is not so much a new variety but a difference in speech based upon the style³ used in conversation. J.A. Maidment defends this opinion and he illustrates this idea with the following diagram, in which differences in style between Cockney and RP can be seen. Moreover, we can notice that these styles overlap with EE.

² For further information, refer to Coggle 1993: 23; 33 and Lillo 1999: 64.

³ Variation in a person’s speech or writing. Style usually varies from casual to formal according to the type of situation, the person or persons addressed, the location, the topic discussed, etc. (Platt et al. 1992: 360)

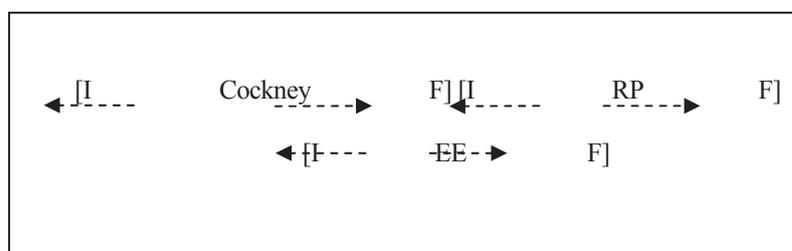


Diagram 2. Graphic definition of EE according to Maidment 1994

As we can see in the diagram there are two contrasting varieties: Cockney and RP. Within these varieties there are differences based on style, which can be either formal (F) or informal (I). Maidment understands EE as an intermediate position between formal Cockney and informal RP. Hence, he does not believe that there is a new accent called EE. On the contrary, he thinks that “all that has happened is that there has been a redefinition of the appropriateness of differing styles of pronunciation to differing speech situations” (Maidment 1994).

Taking into account that EE has been, and still is, very difficult to describe, and the lack of extension, we will not analyse other definitions which focus on features such as social class, geographical location or sociolinguistic aspects⁴. We have only looked at those which refer to EE as a “mixed variety” because they are the most common ones.

The identification of EE as an “ACCENT” or a “DIALECT” has also been another recurrent discussion topic. First of all, we need to know what we understand by each of these categories. To do so, we will use Wells’ explanation, as we believe that it is a summary of several others.

Accent is a pattern of pronunciation used by a speaker for whom English is the native language, or, more generally, by the community or social grouping to which he or she belongs... A difference of accent is a difference between varieties of General English, which involves only pronunciation. A difference between varieties [dialects] may involve any or all of syntax, morphology, lexicon and pronunciation. (Wells 1982: 1-4)

Therefore, the main difference between both categories is that accents vary only in pronunciation whereas dialects may also diverge in grammar, vocabulary and phonology. We can then state that an accent includes the “totality of phonetic and phonologic features a person has... In other words, it refers to those sounds which could also be used by a number of other people and which inform us that someone comes from a particular region or social group” (Crystal 1972: 242).

⁴ A summary of all those definitions can be seen in Filardo Llamas 2003: 27-37.

EE has been defined according to three levels, the phonological, the grammatical and the lexical one. Most authors have only focused on the PHONOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES of EE, as they are the most distinctive ones. Since most of its characteristics have been described elsewhere, we will just present a short summary of those in the following table⁵, contrasting them with the RP and Cockney phonemes.

	<i>RP</i>	<i>Estuary English</i>	<i>Cockney</i>
<i>VOWELS</i>			
<i>FLEECE</i>	/i:/	[əi] ~ [ɪi]	[ɪi]
<i>TRAP</i>	/æ/	[æə]	[æ] ~ [ɛ]
<i>STRUT</i>	/ʌ/	[ʌ]	[ə]
<i>THOUGHT</i>	/ɔ:/	[ɔə] [ʊw] + /l/	[ɔ:] ~ [ɔə]
<i>GOOSE</i>	/u:/	[əu] [tʰ] + [tʰ]	[ʊtʰ] ~ [ətʰ]
<i>FACE</i>	/eɪ/	[aɪ]	[ʌɪ]
<i>PRICE</i>	/aɪ/	[āi] ~ [aɪ]	[aɪ]
<i>GOAT</i>	/əʊ/	[ɔʊ] ~ [ʌʊ]	[ʌʊ] ~ [ʊʊ] [ʌ:]
<i>MOUTH</i>	/aʊ/	[æʊ]	[æʊ] ~ [æ:]
<i>CONSONANTS</i>			
<i>GLOTTALING</i>	/t/ /k/ /d/	[ʔ] non initial and syllable final. /k/ /d/	[ʔ] final position, word-final, word-internal intervocalic, in /n__ V/ [ʔ] + [n] [ʔ] in ____ *C (* syllable boundary or word boundary)
<i>STR-CLUSTER</i>	/st/	[ʃt] initial and postvocalic medial. (rare)	[st] ~ [ʃt]
<i>TH-FRONTING</i>	/θ/ /ð/	[eθ] [ð]	[f] [v]
<i>L-VOCALISATION</i>	[ɫ]	[ʊ] ~ [w] postvocally in syllable-final position, and as syllabic consonant.	[o] preconsonantal and absolute final environments.
<i>YOD-DROPPING</i>	/j/ /tj/ /dj/	No /j/ after alveolars. /tʃ/ /dʒ/	/j/ only after /p, b, v, g/ /tʰtʰ:/ /dʰtʰ:/
<i>H-DROPPING</i>	/h/	/h/	No /h/

Table 1. Comparison of RP, EE and Cockney phonetic features.

⁵ The table is based on the categories presented by Przedlacka to describe the phonetic characteristics of EE. For further reading, Przedlacka 2002: 117-187.

Not many authors have identified GRAMMATICAL FEATURES typical of EE. Thus, we will focus on those pointed out by David Crystal (1995: 327)⁶ and by Paul Coggle (1993: 33-34). Question Tags are more frequently used than in other dialects. Sometimes these tags are also substituted by “right” or “innit”. Some negative particles are also frequently used differently in EE. Such is the case of “never” which replaces “no” when the sentence means “only once”.

Besides, grammatical conversion is more frequent than in RP. Adjectives function as adverbs without adding the suffix -ly. It is also quite outstanding the different usage of prepositions in some EE structures, such as “I got off of the bench.” It is fairly common to find EE speakers transferring the third person singular of the present indicative to other persons, as in “we was walking down the street.”⁷ Finally, “ain’t” is often used to substitute different forms of the verbs “to be” and “to have”.

As regards to the LEXICAL CHARACTERISTICS of EE, we have summarised them by looking at Coggle’s work (1993: 60-2) and at the article appeared in the Spanish magazine *Think in English* in December 1998⁸. The word “cheers” is used as a synonym of “thank you”. Coggle (1993: 60) suggests that this meaning is spreading both socially and geographically.

The meaning of the word “mate” is being modified. Coggle (1993: 60) suggests that now it also has the sense “friend”. Nevertheless, this meaning is not completely new as it can already be found in some dictionaries, such as the *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*⁹. In this case, Coggle remarks that the main difference refers to the construction where this word is used in EE - “me and my mate” – in which the order is inverted.

The adverb “basically” is used without any particular meaning at the beginning of a sentence, i.e. it has a filling function. This is mainly used by young speakers of this variety.

Finally we have to talk about the introduction of words coming from American English. As examples, Coggle (1993: 61-2) indicates “hopefully” meaning “I wish...”, “no way”, “there you go” and the greeting “hi!”, as well as “sure” and “right” to answer questions.

Having shown the different defining features of this variety, we need to elucidate whether EE is an accent or a dialect. As we have already mentioned, David Crystal is the main advocator of EE as dialect. He states that there are a series of grammatical traits specific to EE. Those characteristics would certainly

⁶ Crystal defends that EE is a dialect because of these grammatical traits (cf. Crystal 1995: 327).

⁷ The first example is taken from Crystal 1995: 327, and the second one from Coggle (1993: 34).

⁸ VV.AA. “Can you Speak Estuary?”. *Think in English* 2: 22-23. 1998.

⁹ Pearsal, Judy. Ed. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1998: 1141.

identify EE as a dialect, as this is a linguistic category which is based on lexical and grammatical idiosyncrasies.

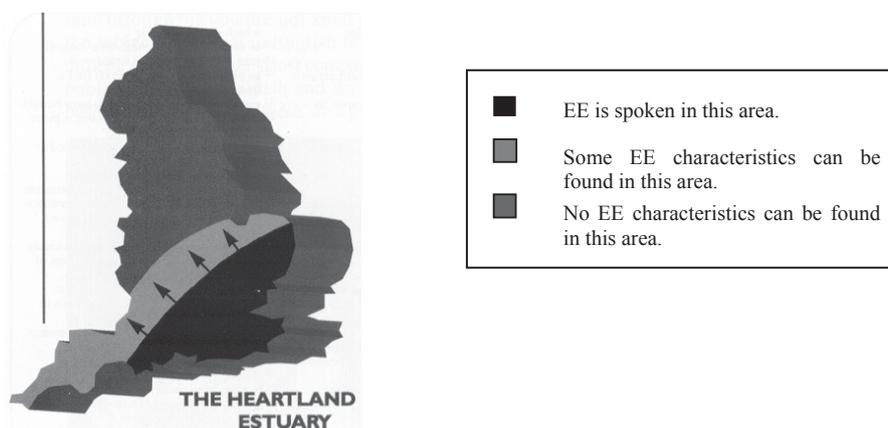
On the other hand, Coggle and Wells categorise EE as an accent whose lexical and grammatical differences depend on its proximity to either RP or Cockney. Hence, Coggle (1993: 35) explains the aforementioned grammatical and lexical traits depending on the end of the continuum next to which the EE speaker is placed. Moreover, Wells (1994) believes that EE is an accent which is associated to Standard English.

Another important question when describing EE is its NAME. Coggle (1993:23) justifies it by saying that it refers to the localisation of the first speakers of this variety not only in London, but also in the estuary of the river Thames which “included the inhabitants of North Kent and South Essex.”

However, there are other linguists, such as Maidment, McArthur or even Wells, who reject this name¹⁰. These linguists propose other labels, for example “New London Voice” or “General London”. Wells (1994) finally accepts EE because “it has already achieved some degree of public recognition.”

We have hinted all throughout this article the GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION of EE. Nevertheless, this is still an issue which is under debate, since neither scholars nor speakers agree about the exact place where this new variety can be found. As its own name shows, it is believed that its origin was in the estuary of the river Thames, although it has extended to the South of England and even further. In the following map we can see the extension, and spreading direction, of EE.

Map 1. Geographical expansion of EE. Adapted from VV.AA. 1998: 22.



¹⁰ Cited in Filardo Llamas 2003: 48-9.

2. REASONS WHY ESTUARY ENGLISH HAS SPREAD

Machan & Scott (1992: 11) name two causes which determine linguistic change. On the one hand, we can talk about the internal history of the language, and on the other about the external one. We are going to focus on the latter, since we find that within that category we can include the sociolinguistic reasons which have helped EE to spread. We can identify seven factors: mass media, society, economy, prestige, accent stereotypes, education network, and geographic mobility.

MASS MEDIA have influenced EE in three main fronts. First, since EE became a public phenomenon, successive press and radio debates have been quite common. Non-linguists entered many of these debates, and their main focus was on how “bad” EE was for the development of the language. Thus, the emphasis was put on trying to avoid EE if a standard pronunciation was wanted. Second, a change could be observed in television channels. Before, presenters were forced to speak with a BBC (or RP) English, but a change could be observed, and nowadays more and more regional accents can be heard in broadcasting stations. Finally, *Eastenders*¹¹ is said to have been of great importance in the development of EE, as some of the pronunciation features of its characters are entering common British pronunciation.

The SOCIAL FACTOR has been a recurring one in any sociolinguistic study of linguistic evolution¹². This factor would usually be related to the social class¹³, which is defined by social indicators such as geographic localisation, socioeconomic power, type of employment, education received and power in society. In our research, we will refer to three main classes: upper class, middle class and lower class. English accents are usually defined by means of two inverse characteristics: social class and regional localisation, whose relationship is represented by an inverted triangle. The higher a social class, the less geographically localised the accent is.

Nowadays, we can observe a social change within the British strata, which is a consequence of the economic growth undergone by the country. Hence, we can describe EE as a double-direction accommodation¹⁴ movement towards a middle-

¹¹ We are talking about the BBC soap opera which started in 1985 and has been on ever since. The action is based in London’s East End, and it has been one of the most successful and influential series in the last years.

¹² The first sociolinguistic study was done by Labov in 1966 about the stratification of the language of New York City, and the main criterion used was the social class. In 1972, Trudgill studied the language of Norwich and once again he referred to the social factor.

¹³ Social class is one of the most common concepts in sociology, although there is not agreement on how to define it... Recently, some sociologists have used employment as an indicator of social class, others have referred to wealth and property, and, finally, others would use life styles as a social indicator. (cf. Guiddens 2002: 855)

¹⁴ Accommodation theory: ... A speaker will, when he/she wants to impress or please someone, use knowledge of the beliefs and values of the addressee and alter, for example, style,

ground accent which would hide the speaker's class identification. As Lawson (2000) states, "language is nothing if not a social tool; as society changes so must speech change with it".

Kerswill (2001) identifies four ECONOMIC REASONS which might have helped EE to spread. First, "economic changes leading to a more efficient agriculture and therefore the loss of rural employment" during the last ten years. Second, the diversification and commutability of rural employment, "leading to a loss of traditional local networks and an expansion of the range of individual personal ties". Third, changes in society due to the two World Wars, which have transformed the family structure and have helped to break social barriers. Finally, "the construction of suburbs in the first part of the [20th] century and new towns in the second half", which emphasised the importance of these urban centres, where new autochthonous accents were developed¹⁵. These four economic developments have eased EE spread, since new contacts have been encouraged due to social and regional mobility.

The concept of PRESTIGE is also important to explain the EE phenomenon. Wells (1982: 104-5) identifies two kinds of prestige. On the one hand, we have to refer to "overt prestige", traditionally attributed to the standard pronunciation – RP. "People agree that this is the correct way of speaking, that speakers with this accent 'have no accent'" (Wells 1982: 104). On the other hand, we need to mention "covert prestige", which is the kind of hidden prestige attributed to some of the characteristics of the working class' speech and which causes the adoption of some of its linguistic features. Prestige is usually linked to the aforementioned social factor and hence, the more overt prestige is given to an accent, the higher in the social scale it would be placed. Both kinds of prestige have a role in EE. We would have an upward movement towards the adoption of EE (or RP) by working class speakers because of the overt prestige associated to it. However, we could also point out a downward movement towards the adoption of Cockney (or a regional accent), as it carries on some positive connotations – such as masculinity or friendliness, among others.

Joined to the prestige factor are the ACCENT STEREOTYPES attributed to each accent. According to Honey (2000) "language encodes a value-system", which relates to any factor such as social class, status, age, locality or group solidarity. Thus, the speaker would accommodate to the accent of the receptor so as to be accepted, understood, or associated with a positive social identity (cf. Harris & Levey 2002: 19). Chambers & Trudgill (1986: 75) describe "social networks"¹⁶ as

accent, pitch or rate, to make the speech behaviour more acceptable to the person addressed. (Kramarae 1982: 97)

¹⁵ The development of these new city accents has been studied by what has been called "urban dialectology", a new discipline which has quickly spread in the last years. For more information about this kind of studies, check Chambers & Trudgill 1986 and Foulkes & Docherty 1999.

¹⁶ Micro-level social clusters (Chambers 2002:74).

the biggest influence, as they cause the speakers' adoption of the accent of their own social network. The importance of accent stereotypes in the British culture could be highlighted by the frequent usage of different accents to typify contrasting characters in cultural manifestations such as films¹⁷ or books.

Stereotypes associated to RP differ radically from those assigned to any regional variety. We could sum those stereotypes up by saying that the former is linked to the competence characteristics, whereas the latter's characteristics are determined by group relations¹⁸. Nevertheless, EE stereotypes differ depending on the person who is using it. Thus, opinions about it range from being modern and fashionable, to giving street credibility, providing closeness to the speaker, and hiding any kind of social or geographical origin. But overall, EE is meant to be neutral, as it would prevent the speaker from being associated with the negative stereotypes attributed to either RP or Cockney nowadays.

EDUCATIONAL NETWORKS were determining for RP to be spread, since it was linked to the public schools network. However, we cannot think of EE being associated with a certain kind of schools. Moreover, school practices as regards Standard English will help to develop the students' identity (cf. Edwards 1982: 27). Nowadays, there is a debate about teaching RP at schools or letting children express themselves in their own accents. However, teachers' and classmates' attitudes should be taken into account in this debate, as they could be important in the academic and group¹⁹ evaluation of the student. Up to the moment, schools have opted for teaching the standard variety whenever it is required, but the regional variety is also maintained so that students do not lose their own identity.

Finally, GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY has helped the quick expansion of EE. This regional mobility first started with East Londoners emigrating to the rural areas of the Home Counties after World War 2. Crystal applies the accommodation theory to these migration movements, and explains EE phonetic characteristics as the result of accent modification by inhabitants of those rural areas.

After World War 2, thousands of London speakers did move to outside the city, and to the new towns which were built around the capital. Their move will have caused many to modify their accents, and their numerical presence (as well as their economic standing) may even have influenced the original residents to accommodate in their direction (Crystal 1995: 327).

¹⁷ To see an example of accent stereotypes used in the cinema, check Filardo Llamas 2003: 115-9.

¹⁸ For more information about the values attributed to each accent, check Giles et al. 1991: 193.

¹⁹ We will understand by group the "entity that consists of interacting people who are aware of being bound together in terms of mutually linked interests" (Brown and Levinson 1989: 298). In schools, associations between students could be highly important, as they would probably accommodate their accents to be accepted in a group.

We can see a summary of the factors which have influenced the growth of the EE phenomenon in the following diagram. We only focus on those subjective agents we have already mentioned. We believe the causes in it represented are a consequence of the rest of factors mentioned in this section.

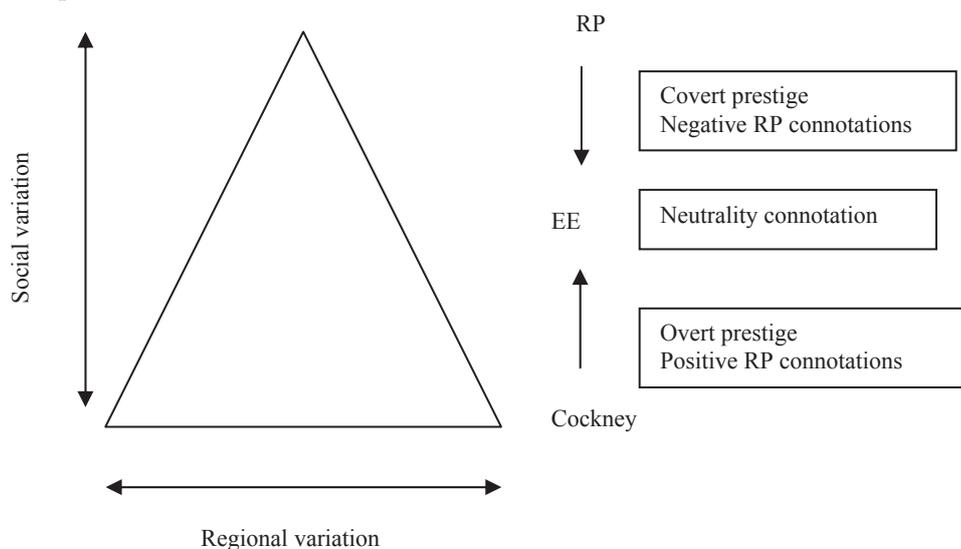


Diagram 3. Summary of subjective factors influencing the expansion of EE.

3. ESTUARY ENGLISH SPEAKERS

In the last twenty years, EE has been a common topic of debate. This has created a stereotype of the EE speaker, although we are not aware of any field work study having been done yet. Thus, in this section we will try to define the EE prototypical speaker. To do it, we will use those social categories which have been used in the EE literature to define its speakers. We have identified five social parameters, which could be divided in primary and secondary. Primary parameters are the traditional criteria in a sociolinguistic study²⁰: age, sex, and social class. Secondary parameters are those which have been identified as typical of EE: occupation and public appearance.

²⁰ Take for example, Labov, William. *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington DC: Centre for Applied Linguistics. 1966.

AGE is the only factor which has been scientifically studied²¹. Przedlacka has mainly studied the linguistic changes of teenagers, who certainly seem to have modified their accent. She decided to study the language of youngsters because that period is prone to innovations. Therefore, we can talk about a social change in the meaning of RP, i.e. the values attributed to the standard variety by young people differ from those attributed by older generations. Hence, by using altered pronunciation features, young people mark a “social identity that sets them apart from those other groups from which they wish to distance” (Bex 1994).

The SEX²² of the speakers could also help them to determine the accent they choose. We are not aware of any scientific study in which the sex parameter of the EE speaker has been studied. Nevertheless, we could say that most of the differences between men’s and women’s speech can be found in the pronunciation (cf. Trudgill 1972 & Gordon 1997). According to Trudgill (1972: 182-3), women are closer to the standard variety because of women’s conscience of the importance of status in society and, thus, judgements associated to them. Moreover, working-class speech is associated with masculine connotations. We could then say that it is easier for a man to adopt EE. Nevertheless, women looking for a modern image would also turn to this accent. Once again, we can identify language as a social tool, as it reflects that gender stereotypes are being broken and that both sexes are being equalised.

We have already referred to the SOCIOECONOMIC FACTOR in the section above. However, social class is also an important defining characteristic of EE speakers. To describe members of a social class, we would have to establish on which “social and economic indicators” it has to be based (cf. Labov 1985: 285). Social class indicators for EE should be based on those aspects - such as education, employment, power or prestige – which have helped it to spread. Prestige is one of the most important elements to be taken into account because it is linked to the accommodation theory. As a consequence of the accommodation undergone in social-class terms, we could find an average middle-class EE speaker. This prototypical middle-class person would be the result of the upward and downward convergence movement made by the upper and lower classes to be grouped in a middle ground. Once more, accent is a language tool which shows the slow dissolution of social class prejudices in the British society.

If we were to do a sociolinguistic study of EE speakers, their OCCUPATION should be included within the aforementioned socioeconomic category. Nevertheless, we have decided to refer to it as a secondary parameter because

²¹ See Przedlacka, J. *Estuary English? A Sociophonetic Study of Teenage Speech in the Home Counties*. Frankfurt am Mein: Peter Lang, 2002.

²² We would like to stress that the sex parameter is linked to gender – i.e. social expectations about the appropriate behaviour for each sex..., that is, social features describing masculinity and femininity. (cf. Giddens 2002: 863). Gender is very important, as those expectations could provoke the speakers’ modification of their accents.

Cogle, one of the most prominent linguists who have studied EE, highlights it. He mainly links EE to liberal professions, although he has also identified it in university, business, and conservative profession workers (cf. Cogle 1993: 75). Notwithstanding, we believe it is important to emphasise that by no means could we define EE as a professional accent.

Finally, we have to name the PUBLIC APPEARANCE FACTOR. EE spread is first and foremost due to the influence of the mass media. Hence, many EE speakers have been identified in the public sphere. Within the mass media, we could place these speakers mainly in TV – where a change has been found mostly in the accent of newsreaders – and in advertising – where the usage of EE is due to the value-system associated to the EE speaker, who is meant to have a better convincing power. On the other hand, we could find EE speakers who are just important figures, such as politicians²³ or pop stars. We would also like to stress the pronunciation changes found in the Queen's speech, whose phonetic characteristics are becoming more and more similar to those of the Southern accent²⁴.

In this research we have described the main features of the EE speaker. We are aware that these characteristics are just stereotypical, as we have based on those traits described in the literature about EE. Nevertheless, we believe it is important to stress the need of further studies which would prove whether this prototypical speaker has a real counterpoint.

We have also tried to clarify the EE phenomenon. We know that debates about EE have been a constant trend in the last decades both in the academic and public fields. However, we think that the prominence of this accent in the mass media has helped this name to become an “empty label” under which any new pronunciation feature can be included. Consequently, it is necessary to do more and more studies about accent modifications and why they are produced so that this kind of pronunciation phenomena are clear not only for academics but also for their native speakers.

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²³ According to Schoenberger (2002), EE has been frequently heard at the House of Commons.

²⁴ For a complete study of the Queen's phonetic modifications, check Harrington et al. 2000.

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