

## Who Has Better English?

John: Mik, I'm a Canadian, you're an American.

Mik: Um-hum.

John: Do you think the British speak in a better way than we do?

Mik: I think that they often speak in a clearer way than we do, in the sense that it's easier to understand them, because they speak with such clipped, clear intonation, often in pronunciation. Whereas Americans, and also Canadians, have a tendency to roll their words to speak a little further back in their throat. So I always feel as if I'm a little foggy in my speech when I'm talking with someone from Britain, although I never tell them that of course.

John: Of course not. Hahaha.

Richard: Well, speaking as an Englishman, I should point out, that I imagine you're talking about Received Pronunciation, what you might call standard spoken English. Because I can assure you, as you obviously know, you can go to regions with dialects and accents where you would have great difficulty in understanding what's being spoken, and where you would no doubt say people are mumbling or jumbling up their consonants, or underclearing their diction, or whatever.

John: What English are you speaking right now?

Richard: I reckon I'm speaking Received Pronunciation, as a matter of fact, it may have been coloured slightly by a dialect, or by the fact that I have lived abroad for some time, who knows.

Mik: Perhaps, but sometimes this Received Pronunciation is also called "BBC-English," and it doesn't appear to me that you're talking to me right now like a BBC news reporter.

Richard: Well, a BBC news reporter would presumably be very conscious of the fact that he's speaking into a microphone to thousands of people, whereas I'm happily speaking to you now around this table, not trying to project my voice.

John: One thing I've always wondered, Richard perhaps you could tell me, is when they say Received Pronunciation, received from whom? Ah, is this received from?

Richard: I'm not a linguist so I can't tell you how this particular phrase originated.

Mik: I've always had this vision of it being given, handed from above, Received Pronunciation, as it were. Whereas I'm just a General American. A General American, that's very democratic.

John: Let's not get nasty now. But Richard, you say you're speaking standard English then, but where do you come from in England?

Richard: I come from eastern England, from just outside a town called Norwich, and I could of course slip into a local dialect.

John: Do that for me.

Richard: Well, if I want to I could do that, but you might not find that so easy to understand now, mind you. Of course, back there in Norwich a lot of people speak like this.

John: What did he say?

Mik: I understood him, I thought that was kind of nice.

Richard: And that was, I'm sure, only an approximation of the genuine article, but there we are.

Mik: Why only an approximation? Didn't you actually speak without accent ever?

Richard: I didn't grow up in a family where it was natural to speak with that accent, but it was around us in the local town, and I went away to school, and this sort of thing.

Mik: Well, just to strike a blow for the United States here, I would just like to point out that we have our accents too. What I've been speaking is General American, but the way my sister would speak, and my mother when she was alive, would be something more like this: they talk a lot more through their nose, they talk a lot more clipped like that, and they whine their voice a little bit so that I'd be talking a little bit more like this. Kind of the way Dustin Hoffman talks when you hear him in some of his films. That kind of an accent. That's the accent I have from Milwaukee, where I come from.

John: Ok. I think Richard's is more pronounced, Richard's is more different between the two, than what you just did.

Mik: I would say so, and of course we didn't have time to have all those individual dialects form, because the country grew over a period of only about a hundred and fifty years, whereas Great Britain had a thousand years to create their different dialects, at least.

John: Yeah.

Richard: Of course I was highly amused the first time I was in America when people say: "Hey, you have a really cute accent."

John and Mik: Hahaha.

Mik: Quite! One of the things that must be irritating for you John, is that you are constantly being assumed to be an American, speaking General American, but you have a Canadian accent, and that is a different accent than the American accent.

John: It is.

Mik: The GA.

John: It is, and you're right, I always get very annoyed, because people just lout me in under this general umbrella term; American. I'm not, I speak Canadian. I say "about" different than you do for example, and other expressions in the way I talk I'm sure are very different, but people don't notice it. They just....

Mik: I notice it. I noticed that you have more "sing-song" in you intonation. You're up and down, you use intonation more than a General American accent. We tend to pound away at things with rhythm and emphasis, rather than intonation to make our point.

Richard: One thing which interests me is what's going to happen in the next five hundred years with dialects? I mean, with television and so many things militating towards a uniformity.

John: That's true.

Mik: That's true.

Richard: On one hand, on the other hand we have these huge communities with their own versions of English. Is English gonna become more uniform or less uniform?

John: Yes.

Mik: That's curious, you're right, I mean, India has its own form of English. If you look on the Word program, you see, I think there are fifteen different lists of English, and each of them has its own spelling systems, and grammar systems, and you can put any of them on, there's New Zealand, and Caribbean, and....

John: I feel that every time something like language looks like it starts to get uniform, that people become more aware of their language, and then they suddenly are very conscious about protecting their language. So I think we're gonna continue with all these dialects. I don't think we're gonna converge into one general English that's a mixture.

Mik: English has become the international language, and it belongs to no one nation anymore, but that's one of things I like about the language, is that we pick up words from all over, and are willing to bring them in.

John: Yeah, this is true, one of the first introductions I had to Norway was in fact just

trying to figure out why we have this man called an "ombudsmann" in Canada, where the word came from. Then I found it was Norwegian, very interesting, very interesting.

Mik: Yeah, of course.