

## Re: accents

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In article <1112108011.915368.159090@l41g2000cwc.googlegroups.com>, "Iain" <[iain\\_inkster@hotmail.com](mailto:iain_inkster@hotmail.com)> wrote:

- > *Don't you think that if Standard Written English didn't exist, spoken*
- > *English would have evolved further beyond recognition? Or perhaps the*
- > *"recognition" in question is provided by writing.*

This is a common gut intuition. Like many gut intuitions, it's wrong, but understandable.

The short explanation is that all speakers learn to speak before they learn how to read (if they ever learn how to read), and their spoken language is basically already set by the time they learn to read.

Literacy only makes minor random changes in a speaker's spoken language (hyperarticulation, spelling pronunciations, etc.), not the kind of major systematic changes needed to keep the spoken language wedded to the written language.

Just look at Chinese, which has a writing system in use by different spoken varieties of the language (to some extent; like English, the written language varies), some of which (e.g. Cantonese and Mandarin) are not mutually intelligible. (I believe Arabic is in a similar situation, but I don't know which varieties are not mutually intelligible. I'd guess a pair like Moroccan and Lebanese.)

English hasn't reached that point yet (though I bet a Scotsman and a Mississippian would have a hell of time having a conversation), but it's on its way.

- > *Writing is an axiom reminder than the /t/ sound at the end of "chased"*
- > *has the same semantic function as a written "-ed" -- our mental image*
- > *of the "-ed" distinguishes "chased" from "chaste" in our minds.*

And writing used to be a reminder that the "e" in "peek" and in "peck" were pronounced essentially the same, differing only in length ([e:] and [e]). Now, the two vowels have a completely different pronunciation from each other ([i] and [E]), and in the US, they are

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changing even more in the Northern Cities ([i] and [ɪ]) and in the South ([@I] and [e@]).

The spelling hasn't hindered these changes at all, nor has it hindered any of the changes that distinguish other English dialects: r-dropping, low back vowel merger, loss of interdental, mergers of various vowels before nasals or liquids, debuccalization of glottalized stops, etc.

> *I always feel, when listening to linguists, that they underestimate how*  
> *integral text is to spoken English. Even an illiterate person may be*  
> *speaking a language kept in check by writing, via school curricula,*  
> *publishers, etc.*

Intuitively, it seems like writing (and mass media in general) should keep speech in check. But all evidence shows that literacy and mass media have little or no systematic impact on the spoken language. Linguists aren't underestimating anything here---they've done the work, and all of the data point to the opposite conclusion that conventional wisdom has come up with.

This isn't a new phenomenon in science. Conventional wisdom used to tell us that the earth was flat (just look at it---how can this flat surface not be flat!) and that heavier objects fell faster than lighter objects.

And don't even think about rotational mechanics... that stuff makes no sense at all to the layman!

Nathan

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