

# Emergence of tone in 'non-tone' languages

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Estuary English is a group of English lects in England, based on the lower-class speech of London, spreading ever further from London with each passing year. It carries a strong element of social semiotic as a badge of lower-class status, but more than this it implies that the speaker is a 'sharp' modern city person and not some backward yokel.

The vowel in *\_cart\_*, *\_mark\_*, *\_calm\_*, *\_lager\_* is non-rhotic, low and back, and has various lip-positions, sometimes rounded and sometimes not. Many Estuary English speakers pronounce this vowel with a low tone (in some speakers, mid falling to low); the more 'common' the speaker wishes to appear, the more pronounced this low tone becomes.

The vowel in *\_mike\_*, *\_kite\_*, *\_lie\_*, *\_mice\_* varies in pronunciation a lot between speakers, but in some speakers it is identical with that in *\_mark\_* except for the absence of low tone.

Thus in some speakers, the only distinction in pronunciation in the pairs *\_mike\_*:*\_mark\_* and *\_kite\_*:*\_cart\_* is low tone in the second member.

A southern French speaker, from the Narbonne area, once tried to tell me how to pronounce *\_dessus\_* and *\_dessous\_* (I had always used [d@s'y] and [d@s'u]). In her pronunciation, the vowels had very little difference in quality (fully back *\_ou\_* versus almost fully back *\_u\_*) but there was a notable difference in tone in the stressed syllable: *\_u\_* was high and *\_ou\_* was low.

Samuel

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