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Cockney Dialect Group Report

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Group Report on the Cockney Dialect By Trent Garlin, Delphi Molyviatis

When many people think of a British accent two distinct types typically come to mind, an overly posh royal family type accent, or an Oliver Twist Cockney accent. However, the Cockney dialect is a lot more complicated and interesting than simply dropping the 'h' and 't' from the English language, and this report will explore the history of the dialect as well as the phonology, the morphology and its syntax.

Speakers and Region

Cockney is both an accent and a dialect. It is unique to England in the United Kingdom and generally spoken by people living in London or the South East, although the exact region is hard to properly define. The dialect is typically associated more with the lower class due to its history. Cockney is generally a more urban dialect as it is associated with London. Cockney was a much more common dialect a couple hundred years ago than it is today, although it is still spoken.

Demographic speakers of Cockney tended to be Anglo-Saxon and lower-class Londoners and people from the South East of England. Although now with migration, the variation of speakers in London also applies to the Cockney dialect: far from a homogeneous dialect, the speakers come from a wide variety of races, and ethnicities, but this is a newer development of the dialect. Below is a dialect map of the regions that Cockney is found and most commonly associated with, with the circles indicating "hotspots."



Fig 1: Dialect map from <http://ininet.org/british-english.html>

History

The term “cockney” was first recorded being used in the late 1300’s and comes from the word “cokeney” which means cockrel’s (rooster’s) egg. It was most distinct from others in the region due to its use of rhyming slang. Rhyming slang is something unique to the Cockney dialect and involves using various words that rhyme in place of the words themselves. For example, stairs rhymes with ‘apples and pears.’ These phrases would also sometimes be shortened to just the first part of the phrase, so “mind the stairs” becomes “mind the apples.” Rhyming slang was especially useful for lower class Londoners in the 14th century and onwards who wanted to speak about the upper class or royalty without fear of punishment.

Phonological Features

In Cockney, there are many differences in the accent from Standard American English. Speakers of the Cockney dialect tend to replace the [t] sound with a glottal stop and omit the [h] sound from words. It is also typical to replace the [θ] sound with a [f] sound, so “Thanks!” becomes “Fanks!” or [fæŋks]. Another common phonological feature is having the [ð] sound replaced by the [v] sound, so “brother” becomes ‘buva’ or [bʌvə]. They also tend not to use a hard ‘r’ sound as Standard American English does. Below are some charts showing diphthongs in the Cockney dialect:

Closing diphthongs of Cockney on a vowel chart:

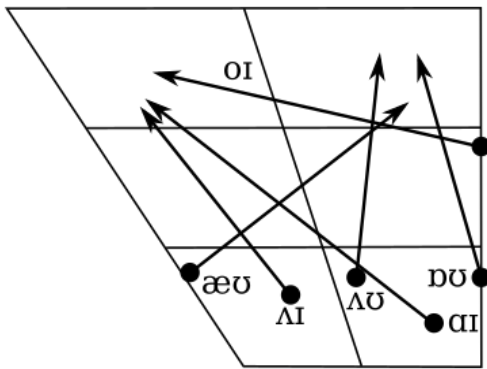


Fig 2: Cockney, /en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cockney

Centering diphthongs of Cockney on a vowel chart:

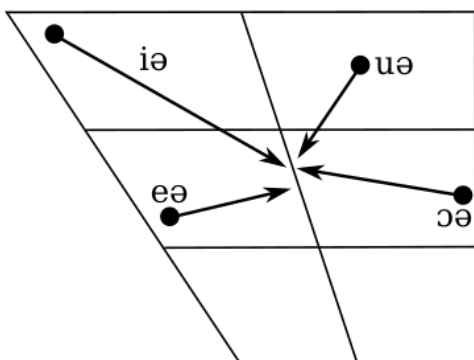


Fig. 3: Cockney, /en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cockney

Morphological Features

Morphologically, Cockney is fascinating. The dialect takes binary expressions and treats them as single words. Historically, this was done intentionally in order to confuse listeners. The chart below gives some examples of this:

English	Rhymes with	Cockney
Feet	Plates of meat	Plates
Teeth	Hampstead heath	Hampsteads
Legs	Scotch eggs	Scotches
Eyes	Mince pies	Minces
Arms	Chalk farms	Chalks
Hair	Barnet fair	Barnet
Head	Loaf of bread	Loaf
Face	Boat race	Boat

Thus, if a person speaking Cockney English would tell a girl she has a beautiful face, they would tell her she has a “beautiful boat.” A fun bit of trivia is that the phrase “blowing a raspberry,” a phrase which is also used commonly in the US, is actually based in Cockney morphology itself! “Raspberry” is the first part of “raspberry tart,” which in turn rhymes with “fart,” which is the sound that it makes when you ‘blow a raspberry.’

Other than its unique method of rhyming slang, Cockney is very morphologically similar to modern standard English. It uses the same affixation and word modification, but actually doesn’t record the use of any novel acronyms.

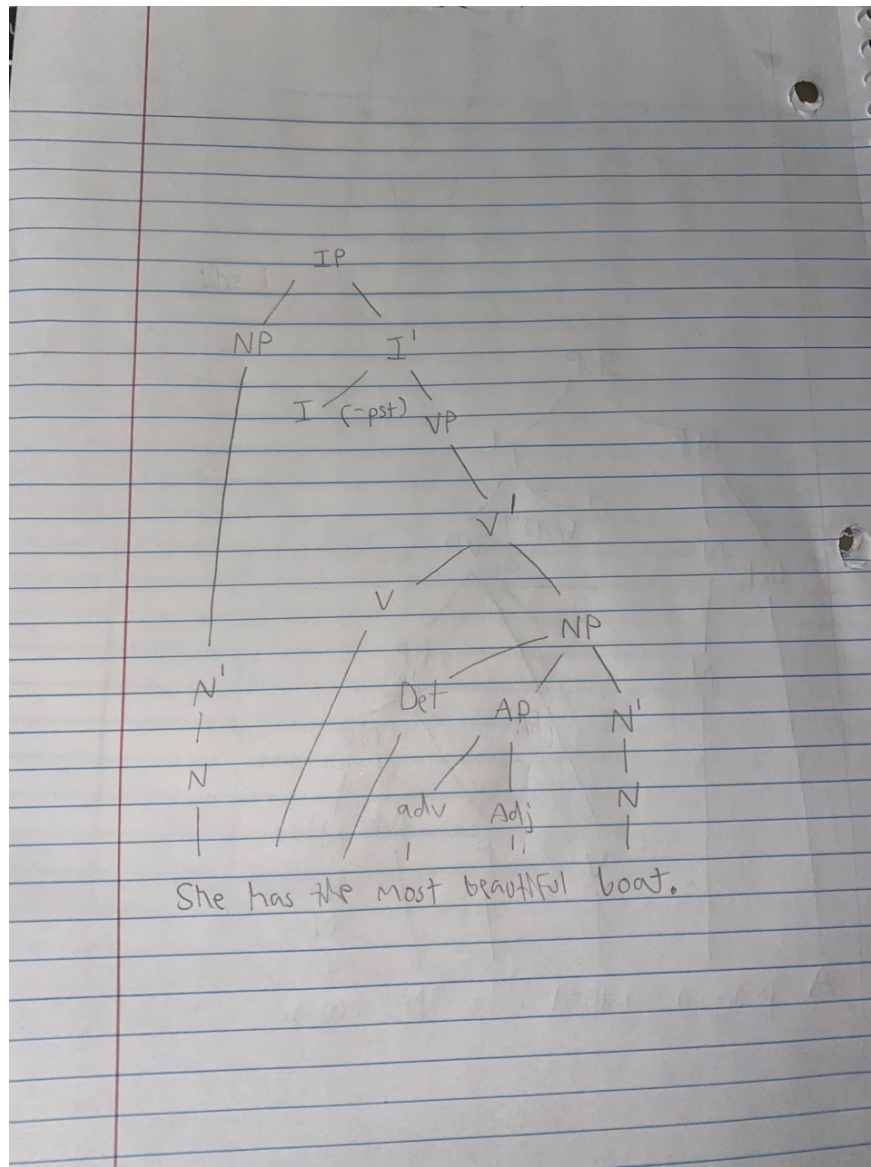
Syntactical Differences

Syntactically, Cockney English is not terribly different from modern standard English.

Negation: It’s common for people speaking in the dialect to substitute the word “never” instead of “ever,” appearing to say the opposite of what they actually did. For example: “she had the most beautiful boat I had ever seen” becomes “she had the most beautiful boat I had never seen.” In the English that us Central Pennsylvanians are accustomed to, these sentences would have opposite meanings; Cockney speakers use them interchangeably.

“That is the biggest fish never”

“I could eat this one type of food for never”



Reception and Possible Future

This dialect has been looked down on over the years but in recent times has been considered more popular and even trendy, with some people from upper class backgrounds who purposely put on a Cockney accent. This has its own term and is called 'Mockney'. Cockney used to have a bit of a negative connotation as it is usually associated with the lower/working class, and famous actor Michael Caine is a British actor who is a well known Cockney who surprised people by making it big in acting while keeping his Cockney accent. Cockney is still in the national consciousness as references to Cockney culture and rhyming slang abound in radio and television. The Cockney dialect has declined over time, though, and experts believe that texting language and immigration plays a part in this change. It is unknown what the exact future of the Cockney dialect is, as it has been evolving for hundreds of years, but many people in Britain are still interested in keeping it alive and it is unlikely to fade out completely anytime soon.

Example of Cockney Dialect - Native Speaker (Michael Caine)

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