

Review

Your voice speaks volumes: It's not what you say but how you say it (a review)

Original work by Jane Setter published by Oxford University Press 2019

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This is a book about pronunciation. However, it's not just about how to pronounce words or use stress and intonation but a social and biological investigation into how pronunciation affects our lives from within the womb before birth and throughout our lives.

It has seven chapters covering how speech actually works, the differences in English accents and why they exist in the UK, how different roles can lead to changes in voice and accent, the role of forensic speech analysis in criminal investigations, the use of the voice in transgender speech and synthesised voices and the differences in English accents used around the world. For teachers and trainers, it is a fascinating insight into how we speak differently and why and is valuable as a fascinating background text for teachers of pronunciation and teachers of English.

Jane Setter is professor of phonetics at Reading University in the UK and a regular media commentator on matters of pronunciation and how to understand social differences in accent, stress and intonation. She begins by explaining how we pick up accents in our native tongue. Apparently, it's in

the womb! The unborn child picks up the voice rhythms and cadences in her mother's womb and when s/he is born can reproduce them as they begin to talk, obviously limited by the ability of voice muscles to pronounce words precisely. So, as science shows, language is literally inborn.

Setter focuses on the variety of English known as Received Pronunciation or RP or, as it now often called, General British (GB). She draws attention to the issue of 'accentism' or 'accent prejudice'. In Britain we still to a degree associate accent with the class structure. Regional accents such as Scouse (Liverpool) and Yorkshire (Yorkshire) or Brummie (Birmingham) are sometimes looked down on by GB speakers who may consider them to be 'lower class' accents. This phenomenon is described as 'linguicism', being prejudiced against someone because of their use of language, particularly accent. She notes that, socially, GB (general British), also called modified RP, and the Edinburgh accent are the most highly regarded but that other regional accents are frequently disparaged. As she points out, regional accents are still a marker of regional and social background

and at times it is possible to locate people very precisely by their accent. In that respect, she says, accent is tribal.

Many people from politicians to TV presenters have taken elocution lessons to improve their accent and to alter the quality of their voice. Margaret Thatcher, Conservative Prime Minister from 1979-1990 took voice lessons to lower her voice and make herself sound more controlled and confident. Voice pitch is measured in Hertz (Hz). Men tend to have a voice pitch between 150 and 200 Hz while women tend to have a higher voice pitch on average in the 200-250 Hz range. By learning to lower your voice pitch you can sound less shrill and more authoritative. That's what Margaret Thatcher did. Setter recommends Peter Roach's *English Phonetics and Phonology* and Alan Cruttenden's *Intonation* as valuable follow-up references and introduces two further peculiarities of English speech patterns. One is uptalk (rising intonation at the end of a statement) and the other is vocal fry. Vocal fry is quite a deep pitch level at about 20-50 Hz and is very deep and rather slow and creaky, often associated with the 'upper class' received pronunciation English accent.

As Setter writes, social class is so ingrained in British society it is difficult to dislodge and it is reflected in the popular view of British English accents, although with more regional accents used by presenters, actors and broadcasters, not to mention popstars (remember the Beatles Liverpool accent?) it is much less extreme than it used to be.

Speaking of popstars, Setter devotes a lot of space to accents used by British singers trying to sound American. Two of the key differences are the pronunciation of the vowels in words like *lot* and *bath*. The General British English speaker would use *lot* and *bath* with lips rounded whereas Standard American English speakers would pronounce them with lips unrounded, giving us the flat vowels like 'laht' rather than with a 'trap' vowel sound. Interestingly, Setter notes, popstars often sound quite different when they go back to their natural accents when speaking. Your professional voice, she says, might sound quite different to your natural voice.

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Professor Setter also works in forensic speech comparison, using auditory and acoustic speech analysis to identify and apprehend criminals. She goes into detail about how the system works and the lengths the authorities go to ensure fairness and avoid the risk of 'stereotype bias'. Voice clues include personal and regional accent, use of fillers such as 'um' and 'ah', forms of address and particular keywords and phrases and even background noise as well as detailed comparison of phonetic features of speech.

One of the most interesting parts of the book is the development of synthesised speech. Originally invented as far back as the late 1700s, Hungarian inventor Wolfgang von Kempelen's 'Speaking Machine' used bellows for the lungs, rubber tubes for the mouth and nose and the reed from a woodwind instrument such as a clarinet for the reproduction of the voice (the vocal folds or voice box).

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Apparently, utterances could be understood by listeners but they were monotone. Modern development can reproduce reasonably accurately the voice of a person who has lost their voice although, depending on the TTS (text to speech) synthesiser which is used, speech produced may appear to be slower or more stilted. One of the fascinating features of *Your Voice Speaks Volumes* is that you can actually scan examples of speech and also voice synthesisers using your mobile phone. Setter also provides links to YouTube to help readers access the information.

The final chapter looks at English around the world, once again from the point of view of how the way people speak and their pronunciation leads to differences in social awareness. Setter distinguishes between 'Old Varieties of English' (the English spoken by immigrants from the British Isles) used, for example, in the USA, Canada, and Australia and 'New Varieties of English' or as L2 (English as a second language) spoken in India and Singapore (New Varieties) and India and Malaysia (L2). The other variety, EFL (English as a Foreign

Language), is spoken in Russia, among other countries. Setter goes on to make the point that the existence of 'Old', 'New' 'L2' and 'EFL' varieties of English gives rise to attitudinal differences and even prejudice between speakers, particularly on the part of some speakers of 'Old' varieties who assume an unjustified superiority. Accents are influenced by the mother tongue or variety of English used in different regions and are simply different, not better or worse, although there may be misunderstandings, particularly due to differences in intonation. She praises the work of Jennifer Jenkins on English as a Lingua Franca (*Global Englishes: A Resource Book for Students*). Originally used to describe L1 users communicating with L2 users of English, English as a Lingua Franca now encompasses anyone using English for communication wherever they come from. As she says, English is viewed as a truly global language, developing in a way to suit the communicative purposes of anyone who is using it.

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'Whether we like it or not,' Setter sums up, *'we are judged on the way we speak: on our accent, our voice quality, our pitch, our ability to enunciate clearly. There is certainly no language of which this is truer than English – certainly in present times, with its position as a global language'.*