

Teaching unit 14: Accent and Social Class – DRESSing down in *Made in Chelsea*

Background

The pronunciation of certain vowels has been changing recently in London, particularly those that are short and pronounced with the tongue positioned near the front of the mouth. This includes the vowels in words like KIT, DRESS, and TRAP. What is interesting about these particular pronunciation changes is that they are closely linked to social class, now and historically, with upper and lower classes having very different use of these vowels.

Using a set of audio clips, the discussion points describe how these short front vowels in London English have changed over the past 50 years, going from the very high and front pronunciation of DRESS and TRAP vowels that was characteristic of the Queen’s English in the 1960s (as illustrated in a short extract from the Netflix program *The Crown*) to the newer system we find developing among different social groups in the region today (as illustrated in short extracts from the speech of characters in *Made in Chelsea* and *The Only Way is Essex*).

Audio clips and links to relevant Linguistics Research Digest articles are available at:
<http://www.teachrealenglish.org/teaching-units/14-accent-and-social-class/>

Discussion points

Lexical Sets

Linguists often use keywords, known as **lexical sets**, to describe the pronunciation of particular vowels in a language or variety. The DRESS vowel, for example, refers to the way the vowel in the word *dress* is pronounced, so it refers to words like *bed*, *head*, *step* and hundreds more. These terms for lexical sets were first devised by the phonetician John Wells in his book *Accents of English* as a way of easily illustrating pronunciation differences across accents. His system gets around the problem that one cannot simply refer to the sound of the vowel, as this is precisely what varies from accent to accent.

For example, words in the BATH set (covering words such as *bath*, *staff*, *clasp*, *dance*, etc.) are pronounced with the tongue positioned back in the mouth in Southern England (the symbol for this sound in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is [ɑ]) but with the tongue positioned centrally or front in the mouth in Northern England and the United States (the IPA symbol is [æ]). We can describe this contrast succinctly by talking about different pronunciations for the whole BATH lexical set.

DRESS and TRAP historically

Until the 1960s, middle-class and upper-class London English speakers pronounced their DRESS vowels as well as their TRAP vowels with their tongue positioned much higher in the mouth than other Londoners did. This meant that words like “trap” were pronounced more like “trep”, and a word like “dress” sounded something like “dreys”.

You can hear this in the brief audio extract from *The Crown*, where Queen Elizabeth is telling Princess Margaret that the announcement of Margaret's wedding will have to be postponed because the Queen is pregnant.

Queen: We're going to have to delay it.
Margaret: Delay what?
Queen: The announcement. Just for a few months.
Margaret: Why?
Queen: Because of the baby.
Margaret: What baby?
Queen: Mine. I'm **expecting**.
Margaret: Since **when**?
Queen: Fourteen weeks.
Margaret: Why didn't you tell me **that**?
Queen: I've tried but your head's been in the clouds understandably.
Margaret: Sorry, and what has expecting got to do with anything?

When the Queen says "I'm expecting" she uses a high vowel in the second syllable of *expecting* (**exPEYcting**). In Princess Margaret's answer, "since when?", the vowel in the word *when* is also high (**whEYn**). And when Margaret goes on to say "why didn't you tell me that?", she again pronounces the vowel in *that* with the tongue positioned further front and higher in the mouth than it would be today, sounding more like "**thEt**".

This extract is a good example of what the DRESS and TRAP vowels used to sound like in London among more upper-class speakers.

DRESS and TRAP today — upper-class speakers

After the 1960s, both DRESS vowels and TRAP vowels began to be pronounced with the tongue positioned lower in the mouth, or the "vowel space". Linguists have argued that the TRAP vowel shifted downwards first, dragging the DRESS vowel along with it afterwards. For most speakers, the system stabilised with TRAP vowels pronounced quite low in the mouth, and DRESS vowels slightly above this.

But for some upper-class and upper-middle-class Londoners recently, the DRESS vowel has continued moving downward, so that it has started to resemble the vowel in TRAP words. This pattern is now particularly prominent among young, upper-middle-class speakers and has become one of the distinctive ways we 'hear' them as posh, sometimes parodied as the "gahp yahr" stereotype.

Binky and Millie are characters on the famous Channel 4 reality show *Made in Chelsea*. We can hear in their speech instances of the DRESS and TRAP vowels sounding similar to one another. In the soundfile "Gabs", Binky asks her friend Gabby the following question:

Gabs, do you think you guys broke up because the **fact** that he's you know bi**sexual**?

If we listen closely to how Binky says the bolded syllables, we can hear that her TRAP vowel (*Gabs* and *fact*) is very similar to her DRESS vowel (bi**SEX**ual).

A little later in the conversation, Binky goes on to say:

At least it's like, "we broke up because I'm bi". It's not "we broke up because ... you **smell**".

Again, Binky's DRESS vowel in the word *smell* is very low and back in the vowel space, almost approaching something like **smull**.

Another example comes from Millie, another character in *Made in Chelsea*, speaking to her friend Caggie:

I **haven't** **men**tioned **a**nanything about New York.

This example from Millie is interesting because her first DRESS vowel (the first syllable in *MENTioned*) has a fairly standard pronunciation, slightly higher in the vowel space. Her second DRESS vowel (the first syllable in *anything*), however, is pronounced much lower and backer, and sounds very similar to her TRAP vowel (*HAVn't*). This example from Millie illustrates how the pronunciation of vowels can vary, even in the speech of the same individual.

DRESS and TRAP today — working- and lower-middle-class speakers

In another popular reality show, *The Only Way is Essex*, we hear the speech of young people from the wider London area who are from more working- and lower-middle-class backgrounds. When we listen to their vowels, we hear the more typical pronunciation of DRESS and TRAP vowels as clearly distinct. These individuals are not changing the way they pronounce these two vowels.

One of the characters, Amy, makes the following remark:

Yeah, but I'd rather like go and watch **X-Factor** or something

When we listen to the clip, we can hear that the DRESS vowel in *ex* and the TRAP vowel in *factor* are very different, with *ex* pronounced with the tongue higher than *factor*. Similarly, in the clip in which Amy says "I was **Essex** county **champion**", we can hear that the DRESS vowel in the first syllable of *Essex* is typically high and the TRAP vowel in the first syllable of *CHAMpion* is not.

Vowels and Social Class

The change to the DRESS vowel is subtle, but it is an important part of how we hear Southern British speakers as posh or not.

The examples from *Made in Chelsea* speakers show that they resemble the Queen's old-fashioned-sounding style in that their DRESS and TRAP vowels are very similar to each other, but whereas both were very high in the Queen's pronunciation, they are both low in contemporary upper class speech. The more working- and lower-middle-class speakers in *The Only Way is Essex* did not pronounce their DRESS and TRAP vowels in a similar way, and

had a more typical pattern of pronouncing DRESS vowels higher than TRAP vowels. These speakers are not changing how they pronounce the TRAP and DRESS vowels.

In a recent study comparing these vowels in *Made in Chelsea* to their pronunciation in *The Only Way is Essex*, sociolinguists Sophie Holmes-Elliott (from the University of Southampton) and Erez Levon (from Queen Mary University of London) found a clear difference between the two groups, such that only the more upper-/upper-middle-class speakers were making this change. This one accent feature is thus a subtle signal of social class membership (or aspiration). The pattern also testifies to the continued importance of social class in structuring speech patterns in London today.