Ever-changing dialects keep English moving – but grammar is its north star

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Protesting that ‘bad’ grammar should not hold someone back will not stop it from doing so. Accuracy is in everyone’s interest

I say *tomahto* and you say *tomayto*. My wife says *dahrling* and I say my dear. We all speak differently, and some of us speak different. Does it really matter?

Things matter if people think they do. I remember being with a group of Manchester businessmen whose bitterest complaint was that London stole their brightest young people and carried them off south. And not just that. As the young migrated south, they dropped their regional accents to conform to what London called “standard” English. When they came home they sounded like foreigners.

Last week the Dutch/Lancastrian linguist, Willem Hollmann, gave a new meaning to levelling up. He declared that teaching standard English and “received pronunciation” or London RP in schools [discriminated against](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/children-with-regional-dialects-are-marginalised-at-school-pg5jpb7q3) the majority of English children who did not use them at home. This should stop, he argued. There should be no such thing as correct diction because “children who do not speak received pronunciation might struggle and may feel marginalised”.

The great north-south divide, to which Boris Johnson has rightly directed our attention, has long had its roots in “talent skimming”. As long as clever people stayed at home, the rich tapestry of provincial English was just that, a rich tapestry. One of the most damaging things successive British governments have done to that tapestry is to make it necessary for each age cohort to travel miles from home for its higher education and job opportunities, usually in a south-easterly direction. Most never return home, and the brightest and best tend to [drift to London](https://www.theguardian.com/money/2018/mar/18/regions-london-brain-drain-graduates-metro-mayors). Some retain traces of their accents of origin, but many consciously or unconsciously camouflage it with standard English, to get better jobs and to fit in.

Hollmann believes they should not be encouraged to think their home dialect is “incorrect” and somehow inferior to standard English. If they prefer the northern “I were” for “I was”, that is their choice. He wants children to carry their Norse/Saxon grammars and exotic regional vowels to the metropolis with pride. If they fail to get posh jobs as a result, so be it. They should sue for unfair discrimination.

This is a classic case of an argument with a grain of truth in it. In the last century the BBC used to ban regional accents on air and there was a justified outcry. It no longer does. Standard English grammar and pronunciation are no longer upper-middle class English. Linguists have long traced the permeation of RP with “estuarial” English. Privately educated children now drop their consonants. Tony Blair would say dunno, righ-on and geh-off. Even the Queen’s accent is noticeably different from the way she spoke in the strangulated voice of 40 years ago.

While a Graham Norton or a Huw Edwards voice is not that of a Stephen Fry, I cannot believe it is held against them, any more than are the voices of Paul McCartney or Geoffrey Boycott. Most people can manipulate their accents as they choose. But I think most Britons delight to hear regional accents.

Where Hollmann is on more difficult territory, I believe, is over grammar. As he has pointed out in his other writings, [grammar holds the key](https://theconversation.com/grammar-still-matters-but-teachers-are-struggling-to-teach-it-166292) to understanding in all forms of communication. The deployment of nouns and verbs, adjectives and adverbs carries with it the essence of meaning. I cannot see virtue in refusing to teach children standard English as “correct”, just to protect supposed regional sensitivities. How to say tomato does not matter. What does matter are the clarities embodied in singulars and plurals, tenses and conditionals, qualifiers and determinants. Clarity of language is crucial to the presentational skills now so important to a young person’s career – and so rarely taught while time is wasted on algebra and geometry. Protesting that “bad” grammar should not hold someone back will not stop it from doing so.

In the 19th century much debate in Wales and Ireland centred around whether the new school system should teach in the medium of English or in then prevalent local tongues. Nationalist intellectuals demanded that English be banned. To radicals such as Daniel O’Connell, this was antiquarian arrogance, denying poor Irish the skills by which their children might escape poverty. It was “national suicide”. In Wales, Aneurin Bevan said the same of Welsh. English was the language of working-class unity and to deny it to Welsh children was debilitating.

No one wants to see the demise of English dialects. Like the landscapes and townscapes of which they form part, dialect is rooted in ancient customs and cultures. Of course, it should be honoured and studied in schools and colleges. Indeed, all children should be “bilingual in English”. The accents in which these various Englishes are spoken will always be alive and changing – from RP to [multicultural London English](https://www.theguardian.com/society/davehillblog/2013/feb/06/paul-kerswill-multicultural-london-english). It must be the most swiftly mutating language on the planet.

Grammar is different. English is full of irregularities handed down over centuries, and its “correctness” is a reasonable topic for argument. Its spelling is diabolical. But as long as English is the nation’s language – as well as much of the world’s – its communality, its grammatical accuracy is in everyone’s interest. Accent we can leave to the diversity of the human marketplace. But the gods of grammar we should surely respect.