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Cockney as a Regional Variant of British English

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**Introduction**

London is the [capital](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capital_city) and largest city of both the [United Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom) and [England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England). Standing on the [River Thames](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/River_Thames) in southeastern England, 50 miles (80 km) upstream from its [estuary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estuary) with the [North Sea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Sea), London has been a major settlement for two millennia. London is often considered as the world's leading [global city](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_city) and has been termed as the world's most powerful, most desirable,  most influential, most visited, most expensive, innovative, sustainable, most investment friendly, most popular for work, and the most vegetarian friendly city in the world. London exerts a considerable impact upon the arts, commerce, education, entertainment, fashion, finance, healthcare, media, professional services, research and development, tourism and transportation. It is the most-visited city as measured by international arrivals and has the busiest [city airport system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_busiest_city_airport_systems_by_passenger_traffic) as measured by passenger traffic.

London has a diverse range of people and cultures, and more than 300 languages are spoken in the region. There are also few dialects and accents used there. If there is one English accent that everyone has heard of, more often than RP or Estuary, it is Cockney. Pronunciation teachers will confirm this – students who have never heard of other regional accents will always recognize Cockney (at least by name).

**1 Cockney as a Regional Variant of British English**

Cockney, [dialect](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dialect) of the [English language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/English-language) traditionally spoken by working-class Londoners. Cockney is also often used to refer to anyone from [London](https://www.britannica.com/place/London)—in particular, from its [East End](https://www.britannica.com/place/East-End).

The word Cockney has had a [pejorative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pejorative) [connotation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/connotation), originally deriving from *cokenay*, or *cokeney*, a late [Middle English](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Middle-English-language) word of the 14th century that meant, literally, “cocks’ egg” (i.e., a small or defective egg, imagined to come from a rooster—which, of course, cannot produce eggs). That negative sense gave rise to *Cockney*’s being used to mean “milksop” or “cockered child” (a pampered or spoiled child). The word was later applied to a town resident who was regarded as either affected or puny.

To most outsiders a Cockney is anyone from London, though contemporary natives of London, especially from its East End, use the word with pride. In its geographical and cultural senses, Cockney is best defined as a person born within hearing distance of the church bells of St. Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, in the [City of London](https://www.britannica.com/place/City-of-London). It has been estimated that, prior to the noise of traffic, the sound of the Bow Bells reached about 6 miles (10 km) to the east, 5 miles (8 km) to the north, 4 miles (6 km) to the west, and 3 miles (5 km) to the south. The vast majority of the hospitals of London’s East End fall within that jurisdiction.

The church was destroyed by the Great Fire of London in 1666 and by the Blitz (a German bombing offensive against Britain in 1940 and 1941, during the [Second World War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_World_War)).



Map of Cockney territories in London as defined by being able to hear the "Bow Bells".

**2 Cockney Phonetics**

1. As with many accents of the United Kingdom, cockney is non-rhotic. A final -er is pronounced [ə] or lowered [ɐ] in broad cockney. As with all or nearly all non-rhotic accents, the paired lexical sets COMMA and LETTER, PALM/BATH and START, THOUGHT and NORT H/FORCE, are merged. Thus, the last syllable of words such as cheetah can be pronounced [ɐ] as well in broad cockney.

2. T-glottalisation: use of the glottal stop as an allophone of /t/ in various positions, including after a stressed syllable. For example, "scottish," for instance, would be pronounced "sco’ish."Glottal stops also occur, albeit less frequently for /k/ and /p/, and occasionally for mid-word consonants. For example, “Blackboard” becomes “bla’board”,ans Richard Whiteing spelt "Hyde Park" as Hy′ Par′. Like and light can be homophones. "Clapham" can be said as Cla'am (i. e., [ˈkl̥ɛʔm̩ ])"Scottish," for instance, would be pronounced "Sco’ish." Also, in broad Cockney at least, the degree of aspiration is typically greater than in RP, and may often also involve sone degree of affrication. Affrication may be encountered in intitial, intervocalic, and final position. This feature results in Cockney being often mentioned in textbooks about Semitic languages while explaining how to pronounce the glottal stop.

3. The Cockney accent doesn’t put emphasis on the [h] sound when it is the first letter in a word. So, for example, pronounce “herb” as " 'erb," "horse" as " 'orse," and "hopefully" as " 'opefully".

4. Cockney would replace voiceless ‘th’ /θ/ in words like ‘think’, ‘theatre’, ‘author’, with /f/, so they would be pronounced /fɪŋk/, /fɪəʔə/, /ɔ:fə/. Similarly, voiced ‘th’ in ‘the’, ‘this’, and ‘Northern’, would be pronounced /v/, so /və/, /vɪs/ and /nɔ:vən/.

5. Like most English accents, a Cockney accent drops the [r] from the end of a word. For example, "mother" becomes "mo-thah," and "car" becomes "cah."

6. The sound /ɑː/ has a fully back variant, qualitatively equivalent to cardinal 5, which Beaken (1971) claims characterises "vigorous, informal" cockney. The typical short vowel sound [a:] is evidenced by the word "cat", "father".

7. When an “l” sound is at the end of a word, the speaker can substitute the “l” for a vowel sound, like “w.” For instance, “pal” would sound like “pow,” and “trouble” becomes “trou-bow.”

Diphthong alterations:

 /iː/ → [əi~ɐi]:[bəiʔ] "beet"

 /eɪ/ → [æɪ~aɪ]: [bæɪʔ] "bait"

 /aɪ/ → [ɑɪ] or even [ɒɪ] in "vigorous, dialectal" cockney. The second element may be reduced or absent, so that there are variants such as [ɑ̟ə~ɑ̟ː]. This means that pairs such as laugh-life, Bartonbiting may become homophones: [lɑːf], [bɑːʔn̩ ]. But this neutralisation is an optional, recoverable one: [bɑɪʔ] "bite"

 /ɔɪ/ → [ɔ̝ɪ~oɪ]: [ˈtʃʰoɪs] "choice"

 /uː/ → [əʉ] or a monophthongal [ʉː], perhaps with little lip rounding, [ɨː] or "boot"

 /əʊ/ → this diphthong typically starts in the area of the London /ʌ/, [æ̈~ɐ]. The endpoint may be [ʊ], but more commonly it is rather opener and/or completely unrounded, i.e. [ɤ̈] or [ɤ̝̈]. Thus, the most common variants are [æ̈ɤ̈, æ̈ɤ̝̈, ɐɤ̈] and [ɐɤ̝̈], with [æ̈ʊ] and [ɐʊ] also being possible. The broadest cockney variant approaches [aʊ]. There's also a variant that is used only by women, namely [ɐø ~ œ̈ø]. In addition, there are two monophthongal pronunciations, [ʌ̈ː] as in 'no, nah' and [œ̈], which is used in non-prominent variants. [kʰɐɤ̈ʔ] "coat"

 /ɪə/ and /eə/ have somewhat tenser onsets than in RP: [iə], [ɛ̝ə]

 /ʊə/, according to Wells (1982), is being increasingly merged with /ɔː/ ~ /ɔə/.

 /aʊ/ may be [æʊ] or [æə].

 /ɪə/, /eə/, /ʊə/, /ɔə/ and /aʊ/ can be monophthongised to [ɪː], [ɛː], [ʊː] (if it doesn't merge with /ɔː/ ~ /ɔə/), [ɔː] and [æː] ~ [aː]. Wells (1982) states that "no rigid rules can be given for the distribution of monophthongal and diphthongal variants, though the tendency seems to be for the monophthongal variants to be commonest within the utterance, but the diphthongal realisations in utterance-final position, or where the syllable in question is otherwise prominent."

Triphthongal realizations [ɪi̯ɐ̯, ɛi̯ə̯, ɔu̯ə̯, æi̯ə̯] of /iə, eə, ɔə, æʊ/ are also possible, And are regarded as "very strongly Cockney". Among these, the triphthongal realization of /ɔə/ occurs most commonly. There is not a complete agreement about the distribution of these; according to Wells (1982), they "occur in sentencefinal position", whereas according to Mott (2012), these are "most common in final position".

**3 Cockney Grammatical Features**

The grammar of a dialect changes throughout centuries, but very slowly and several grammatical features can be found in many dialects across the country. The majority of these features can be found also in Cockney.

 1. Multiple negation. "Ain't" is used instead of "isn't" or "is not.» For example, «I ain’t lookin’ forward to the meetin’ on Monday.»You can also use double negatives, like “I didn’t see nothin’ [nuffink] there!”

 2. Verb morphology. Tense is simplified. Past Simple is used instead of the Present Perfect. «Have», «has» can is not used. E.g. «I did my work» instead of «I’ve done my work» or «You seen ’im! - I never!»; «They done it.»; «You was.»

3. Reflexive pronouns are used like «’E'll ’urt ’isself. That’ s yourn.»

4. Demonstratives. «Me» is used instead of «my», «them» is used instead of «their». E.g. I'm goin’ to walk the dog with me mum; them books.

5. Adverbs is used without -ly. For example, «Trains are running normal»; «The boys done good.»

 6. The prepositions toand at are frequently dropped in relation to places: I'm goin down the pub I'm going down to the pub, He's round is mate's He is

round at his friend's house, They're over me mum's They're over at my mother's.

7.Other non-standard forms. Cockney often leaves off the “g” in words that ends with “ing.” For instance, "starting" becomes "startin'" and "laughing" becomes «laughin’.»

 8. Question tags are widely used to invite agreement or establish one's position: I'm elpin you now, inneye? I am helping you now, ain't I?—although I may not have helped you before or wanted in fact to help you at all; Well, e knew all abaht it, dinnee? Well, he knew all about it, didn't he?—Because he knew all about it, it's not surprising he did what he did.

**4 Vocabulary. Cockney Rhyming Slang**

Cockney as a [dialect](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dialect) is most notable for its argot, or coded language, which was born out of ingenious rhyming [slang](https://www.britannica.com/topic/slang). There are as many as 150 terms that are recognized instantly by any rhyming slang user. For example, the phrase *use your loaf*—meaning “use your head”—is derived from the rhyming phrase *loaf of bread*. That phrase is just one part of London’s rhyming slang tradition that can be traced to the East End. That tradition is thought to have started in the mid-19th century as code by which either criminals confused the police or salesmen compared notes with each other beyond the understanding of their customers.

The manner in which Cockney rhyming slang is created may be best explained through examples. “I’m going upstairs” becomes *I’m going up the apples* in Cockney. *Apples* is part of the phrase *apples and pears*, which rhymes with *stairs*; *and pears* is then dropped. In this example, a word is replaced with a phrase that ends in a rhyming word, and that rhyming word is then dropped (along with, in *apples and pears*, the *and*). Likewise, “wig” becomes *syrup* (from *syrup of figs*) and “wife” becomes *trouble* (from *trouble and strife*).

Omission of the rhyming word is not a consistent feature of Cockney, though. Other, more-straightforward favourites that are recognizable outside the Cockney [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) and have been adopted into the general lexicon of English slang are the use of *the Boat Race* for “face,” *Adam and Eve* for “believe,” *tea leaf* for “thief,” *mince pies* for “eyes,” *nanny goat* for “coat,” *plate of meat* for “street,” *daisy roots* for “boots,” *cream crackered* for “knackered,” *china plate* for “mate,” *brown bread*for “dead,” *bubble bath* for “laugh,” *bread and honey* for “money,” *brass bands* for “hands,” *whistle and flute* for “suit,” *septic tank* for “Yank” (i.e., Yankee, or an American), and *currant bun* for “sun” and, with a more recent extension, “*The Sun*” (a British newspaper).

Less known are expressions whose meaning is less straightforward, such as *borrow and beg* for “egg” (a term that enjoyed renewed life during food rationing of World War II), *army and navy* for “gravy” (of which there was much at meals in both forces), and *didn’t ought* as a way to refer to [port](https://www.britannica.com/topic/port-wine) wine (derived from women who said, when asked to “have another,” that they “didn’t ought”). *Light and dark* took the place of “park,” an oblique reference to a past directive by the London County Council that a bell be sounded and the gates locked in parks at dusk. *Lion’s lair* came to stand for “chair,” in reference to the danger of disrupting a father’s afternoon nap in his easy chair. Likewise, *bottle and stopper* originated via the word *copper* (a policeman), with *bottle* meaning “to enclose” and a *stopper*referring to someone who prevents another person from doing something.

Many of the rearrangements used in Cockney phrasing became harmless nicknames rather than [sinister](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sinister) code words. By the 1950s many working-class Londoners, fond of a bit of wordplay, were trading those phrases among themselves, often leaving off the rhyming part so that “taking the mickey” came to be trimmed from the original “Mickey Bliss” (i.e., “taking the piss,” British slang for ridiculing someone), and “telling porkies” was cut down from “porky pies” (i.e., “lies”).

Like any [dialect](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialect) or language, Cockney continued to evolve, and today it reflects the [contours](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contours) of contemporary pop [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) in Great Britain. Much of “new” Cockney that first emerged in the late 20th century uses celebrities’ names: *Alan Whickers* standing in for “knickers,” *Christian Slater* for “later,” *Danny Marr* for “car,” *David Gower* for “shower,” *Hank Marvin* for “starving,” and *Sweeney Todd* for “the Flying Squad” (a unit within the London Metropolitan Police). Likewise, those coinages can be coarse, revolving around drinking (*Paul Weller* for “Stella” [Stella Artois, a beer brand], *Winona Ryder*for “cider”) and bodily functions (*Wallace and Gromit* for “vomit”). [Adaptations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Adaptations) have also occurred: *on the rock ’n’ roll* was eclipsed by *on the Cheryl Cole* to mean “being on the dole” (i.e., receiving government aid). Celebrity-centred Cockney can be strung into long riffs:

*I left my Claire Rayners [trainers] down the Fatboy Slim [gym] so I was late for the Basil Fawlty [balti, a type of curry]. The Andy McNab [cab] cost me an*[*Ayrton Senna*](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ayrton-Senna)*[a “tenner,” or £10 note], but it didn’t stop me getting the*[*Britney Spears*](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Britney-Spears)*[beers] in. Next thing you know it turned into a*[*Gary Player*](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gary-Player)*[all-dayer] and I was off my Chevy Chase [“off my face,” or drunk].*

**5 Estuary English**

The second main accent in London was only given a name in 1984. It is called Estuary English, because it is mainly spoken in the areas near the River Thames and its estuary. An Estuary English accent has some features of Standard English, or RP, and some features of a Cockney accent. This accent is very widely used, especially among people under 60 years old, as people of all social classes mix together much more than they used to.

Received Pronunciation can be heard in the same areas as [Estuary English](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Estuary%20English), however [RP](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=RP) tends to be spoken by the upper classes while Estuary English is spoken by the lower and working class.
Estuary English is also far more common in Younger people, with parents who have RP. So [the decline](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=the%20decline) in RP is likely to continue and be replaced with [Estuary](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Estuary).

Many features of the Estuary accent include:

1. The broad A. This includes pronouncing words such as 'fast > farst' and 'path > parth'
2. Regular [Glottal](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Glottal) stops - This is not pronouncing the letter 'T' in most words. i.e water is pronounced war'er.
3. Th-Fronting - This is prouncing most words that start a 'Th' with an F. i.e 'Three > free', 'think > fink' and 'north > norf'. If 'th' is in the middle of a word, it is usually replaced with a 'V'. i.e 'other > ovver' 'southern > sovvern'
4. L-vocalisation - This is not pronouncing the letter 'L' in certain words and tends to be ended with a 'w' sound instead. i.e 'fall > faw' and 'milk > miwk'.
5. H-Dropping - not pronouncing the letter 'H' at the start of most words. i.e 'here > ere' and 'hate > ate'
6. G's are also not pronounced at the end of words. 'swimming > [swimmin'](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=swimmin%27)
7. Other things are included in the accent other than just the [pronounciation](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=pronounciation). This includes double negatives and finishing a lot of sentances with questions even ifthey are not asking a question. i.e I didn't mean to, did I? and 'we should shouldn't we?'

**Conclusion**

If traditionally, a Cockney is someone from East-end London and the dialect of East-enders, today things are different and the Cockney dialect spread across the city. When it first appeared in a pejorative way, to define poor people of the working class, those neighborhoods such as Cheapside, Shoreditch, Finsbury, Bow and Bermondsey were extremely poor, but today they are experiencing a phenomenon like Brooklyn in NYC and they are emerging as new in areas. Even if Cockney rhyming slang is definitely used less often today, it is far from dead. In fact, the invention of new rhyming slang still emerges to this day especially using names of the celebrities such as ‘Ayrton Senna’ meaning tenner.

In 2012 the Museum of London, citing a study it had conducted, announced that Cockney rhyming slang was dying out and suggested that youth slang, rap and hiphop lyrics, and text messaging was threatening the “traditional dialect” of workingclass Londoners. At about the same time, a campaign to teach Cockney in East End schools developed, as did efforts to recognize Cockney rhyming slang as an “official dialect” among the more than 100 languages already spoken by the area’s diverse population.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that if Cockney was born as a poor language, it developed throughout the centuries into a proper dialect with its features and rules, and it became so popular that there is also literature in Cockney dialect. Nowadays, considering the particular condition of the English language and specifically that of RP that is not the “perfect English” anymore; we will assist, in a rapid increase in the use of dialects such as Cockney and in this way, it will be frequently used and lose its coded feature which is so characteristic.

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