ON THE OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE CONTINUUM:

STANDARD BRITISH ENGLISH AND COCKNEY.

A HISTORICAL OUTLINE OF THE PARALLEL DEVELOPMENTS

OF THE TWO VARIETIES

MATTEO SANTIPOLO

Standard (British) English and Cockney are the varieties of English placed on the opposite ends of the linguistic continuum in the London area. The present article aims at drawing an outline of their almost parallel histories and developments. The variety in-between, that is Estuary English, is intentionally not dealt with here, referring the reader interested in the subject to Santipolo 2000 and 2001.

1. Standard (British) English vs. RP

Standard English (SE) is that dialect of English, the grammar, syntax, morphology, slang and vocabulary of which are most widely accepted and understood. Here "widely" means both socially and geographically, that is, the dialect that, least of all, raises critical judgements about itself and is generally considered *overtly* prestigious. It is perhaps worth remembering that "the chief difference between standard and non-standard varieties are not in their 'superior' or 'inferior' linguistic structures, but in the different level of social acceptability accorded to them and in the fact that non-standard varieties are not extensively codified or officially prescribed." (Milroy & Milroy, 1993: 6). In the present work, we shall refer to Standard *British* Eng-

lish, leaving out other possible standards (Standard American English, Standard Australian English, Standard Irish English, etc.).

If SE is a dialect, *Received Pronunciation* (RP), where *received* is to be meant in its 19th century sense of "accepted in the best society", is the accent most generally associated with it (other names by which this accent is commonly known include Oxbridge English, BBC English, and Queen's English). It is, however, possible to speak perfectly SE with an accent other than RP. This is the case, for instance, limiting our attention to the British Isles with many learned Irishmen and Scotsmen. There may be slight differences concerning grammar, slang, vocabulary, etc., but the ones that, even without switching to a different dialect, stick out most, regard pronunciation.

On the other hand, dialects other than SE are never spoken with an RP accent, and it would definitely sound strange and quite unnatural to overhear a conversation between, say, two Welshmen, calling each other *bach!* or *del!*, uttered in an Oxbridge accent.

1.2 Historical Outline

The dialect which we now call Standard English is the result of a long process of changes, influenced by social, political, cultural and economic factors that started in the Middle English period. No direct connection can, indeed, be established with West Saxon, the written standard of Old English.

When, in the 15th century, the Court moved from Winchester to London the history of what was to become SE and that of the new capital grew indissolubly intertwined.

A regionally standardised literary language based on the dialects of the Central Midlands (Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire and Bedfordshire) had already appeared in the late 14th century and had already started to influence the London area, as is proved by the works of Langland and Chaucer.

Recent studies have shown, however, that the geographical area that more than any other contributed to the formation of modern SE is that of the so-called "East Midlands Triangle", namely that included between Cambridge, Oxford and London (Crystal, 1995: 50).
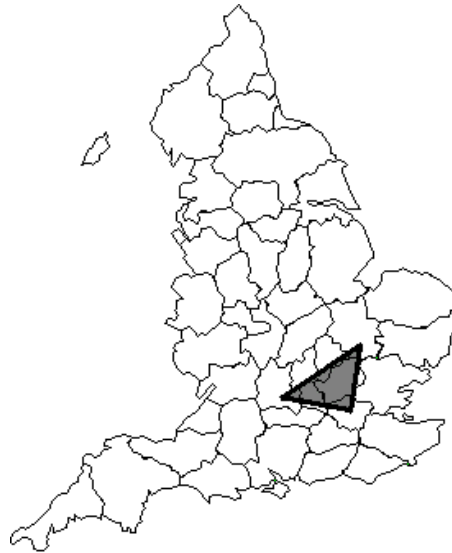
Map 1: The East Midlands Triangle

The two events that gave a decisive contribution towards a somehow unified written standard occurred in the 15th century.

The already remembered emergence of London as the political and commercial centre of the country favoured the rise in importance of the *Chancery*: manuscripts were being copied according to a homogeneous standard, which, little by little, began to make its influence be felt among private citizens as well. And it is no coincidence that William Caxton in 1476 decided to set up his wooden *press* in London (and precisely not very far from Westminster Abbey and the Court) so as to have a constant speech model to look up to (Crystal, 1995: 54). In this way, London English soon became the standard language of the printers and was carried into the remotest parts of the country (Matthews, 1972[2]: 203-4). This was also the time when the speech of London's West End (or, more in general, of the upper classes living

there) started to be increasingly identified with SE; whereas that of the East End (the poorer part of town) was identified with Cockney (see Map 2 below).

It must be pointed out that London, as much then as now, was a magnet attracting provincials from all over the British Isles and, therefore, the type of English that resulted from such a melting pot could only be a hybrid.

The attempts to unify English speech that we have seen so far, all seem to have been the outcome of an almost unconscious process and, in any case, limited to the written language. The first ones who consciously tried to achieve such a result by fostering a standard of pronunciation were the orthoepists of the 16th and 17th centuries, as is confirmed by the comments on the acceptability of kinds of English that began to appear during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). The following one is by J. Hart in the *Preface to his Methode to Read English* (1570):

"[…] the Court, and London speaches, where the generall flower of all English countrie speaches, are chosen and vsed."

(Matthews, 1972[2]: 201)

In *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), attributed to George Puttenham we read that the best type of English is

"the vsuall speach of the Court, and that of London and the shires lying about London within ix Myles, and not much aboue."   (Book   3 Chapter 4)

The role of London and of its speech seem to have become always more and more relevant throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, so much so that Scottish-born King James I (1603-1625) will be able to say that "soon London will be all England." It must indeed be remembered that, with its approximately 250,000 inhabitants at the end of the 16th century, London represented about a tenth of the whole population of England and Wales (Matthews, 1972[2]: 203).

But, as we shall in dealing with Cockney (cf. 2.2 and, in particular, see Thomas Sheridan's statement from *A Course of Lectures on Elocution*, 1762), a distinction, at least as soon as the second half of the 18th century, started to be made between the language of the London lower classes and that of the Court and the Universities, no matter how scanty the number of members of the latter may have been.

If London drew to itself people from all over the country and these, mainly for the reasons we previously saw in dealing with Cockney, were somehow compelled to abandon their native accent or even dialect to adopt that of the capital, the resulting variety, quite obviously, could not sound completely natural, but rather a sort of self-imposed and therefore artificial type of speech.

It was only when the habit of sending children of the upper classes to the so-called Public Schools was established, towards the

middle of 18th century, that the new standard of speech began to be associated with the educated classes and became fluid as all *natural* languages are expected to be.

The Seven Public Schools (the first to be founded was Westminster in 1339. The others are Charterhouse, Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Shrewsbury and Winchester), soon became the symbol of a whole class of people and of values. Among the distinguishing features of this class, language was one of the most important. If a written standard had, by now, a long and settled history, and grammar and vocabulary were quite codified, it was pronunciation that, still at the end of the 19th century, was far from being rigidly established.

One of the first remarks on some kind of standardised pronunciation is by A. J. Ellis[1]:

"In the present day we may […] recognise a received pronunciation all over the country […] It may be especially considered as the educated pronunciation of the metropolis, of the court, the pulpit and the bar."

(*On Early English Pronunciation*, vol. 1, 1869: 23)

This was also the first time the phrase *received pronunciation* made its appearance in a text.

The first scholar to recognise the change that had occurred from geolect to sociolect of SE, was Henry Sweet who in his *The Sounds of English* wrote (1908):

---

[1] All the following quotations are from Crystal, 1995

"Standard English […] is now a class dialect more than a local dialect: it is the language of the educated all over Great Britain […] The best speakers of Standard English are those whose pronunciation, and language generally, least betray their locality […]."

In 1917 Daniel Jones published his famous *English Pronouncing Dictionary* which was to mark a turning point as far as accent is concerned. And in the Preface to the 1st edition he defined his model for English as that:

"most usually heard in everyday speech in the families of Southern English persons whose menfolk have been educated at the great public boarding-schools […]"

and called it *Public School Pronunciation* (PSP). Only one year later, however, he will specify:

"I do not consider it possible at the present time to regard any special type as 'Standard' or as intrinsically better than any other types. Nevertheless, the type described in this book is a useful one. It is based on my own (Southern) speech, and is, as far as I can ascertain, that generally used by those who have been educated at 'preparatory' boarding schools and the 'Public Schools' […] The term 'Received Pronunciation' […] is often used to designate this type of pronunciation […]."

(1960[9]: 12)

Jones's moderate opinion does not seem to have been shared by another linguist of the time, Henry Cecil Wyld, who, in 1914 wrote:

"It is proposed to use the term Received Standard for that form which all would probably agree in considering the best, that form which has the widest currency and is heard with practically no variation among speakers of the better class all over the country."

(*A Short History of English*, 1927[3]: 149)

Such judgements of an intrinsically better variety of English were even carried further in a later work by the same author, the title of which is itself extremely explanatory to understand the principles underlying it: "The Best English: a Claim for the Superiority of Received Standard English" (1934) appeared in the *Proceedings of the Society for Pure English*, No. 4. After explaining that what is generally referred to as *Standard English* is indeed *standard* only as far as "accidence and syntax" are concerned, but instead full of "*provincialisms*" that "[…] none but the uncandid would hesitate to call *vulgarism*, in pronunciation", and after proposing to call this type of English *Modified Standard*, he goes on to explain what should be meant by *Received Standard* (R. S.) and why it should be considered superior:

"R. S. […] is the type spoken by members of the great Public Schools, and by those classes in society which normally frequent these. I suggest that this is the best kind of English, not only because it is spoken by those often very properly called 'the best people', but because it has two great advantages that make it intrinsically superior to every other type of English speech – the extent to which it is current throughout the country, and the marked distinctiveness and clarity in its sounds."

It is clear that the motivations for such a viewpoint do not hold at all: it is a contradiction to say that R. S. is spoken by the upper classes (who, obviously enough, represent only a strict minority of the whole population) and then state that it is "current throughout the country". And again, the illustration of the distribution of various vowel sounds in different varieties of English that follows and is meant to support the second intrinsic motivation, does not add to the idea of the supposedly superiority of R. S.

But no matter how linguistically ungrounded these opinions may appear today, at that time, they still found supporters even from official institutions.

During the heyday of the British Empire (1890-1940), the possession of RP was used as a criterion for the selection of young men as potential officers to be sent abroad and represent the British nation.

Announcers and presenters on the BBC were required to use exclusively RP, and in 1926 John C. W. Reith established *The Advisory Committee on Spoken English* (Poet Laureate Robert Bridges chaired it and D. Jones, G. B. Shaw, and later H. C. Wyld were, among others, all members of it.) The recommended accent was PSP, as RP was still referred to at that time, and one of the tasks of the Committee was to establish some degree of uniformity in the announcers' speech, especially as far as where there may have been more than one choice. After World War II, the Committee became the BBC Pronunciation Unit and its object was to provide guidelines to newsreaders on the pronunciation of place and personal names. When the *Independent Television*

started broadcasting in the 1950s, a new, more relaxed style of speaking on TV became popular. But it was only in the 1960s that the BBC began to use some announcers and commentators from regional stations therefore having mild local accents. Radio 3 and the BBC World Service have, however, remained more conservative until the end of the 1980s, when it was finally announced that the latter would start a new policy of using announcers with a more representative range of accents (McArthur, 1992: 109-111).

Also the Church of England has always been a stronghold of RP to such an extent that, at the beginning of the 20th century, even elocution classes were offered in some Anglican theological colleges.

Nowadays, probably no more than 3%- 5% of the population of England has a totally regionless accent (and, as in the past, these are usually people who have attended the Public Schools or want to sound as if they had), and only 12-15% of the population are native speakers of SE (Trudgill, 1990: 2).

Anyway, those who are still thought to speak an "inferior" sociolect or a geolect, are now, on the whole, closer to SE and RP than their predecessors, and this thanks to the ever-increasing number of them, they are being exposed to, mainly through better education, the media and mobility.

These elements are also of the utmost importance in the slow process, presently working, of raising the consciousness that the acceptance of a given accent or variety as the norm, depends on social, and not linguistic, factors. No elegance, or better expressiveness can

ever be intrinsic characteristics of any given dialect, their commonly-accepted value being the consequence of the power and social and economic influence of the people who speak it.

2. Cockney

"Perhaps Cockneys are a prejudiced race,
but certainly this inexhaustible richness seems
to belong to London more than any other great city."
(Virginia Woolf, *Review of E. V. Lucas's "London Revisited"*,
1916)
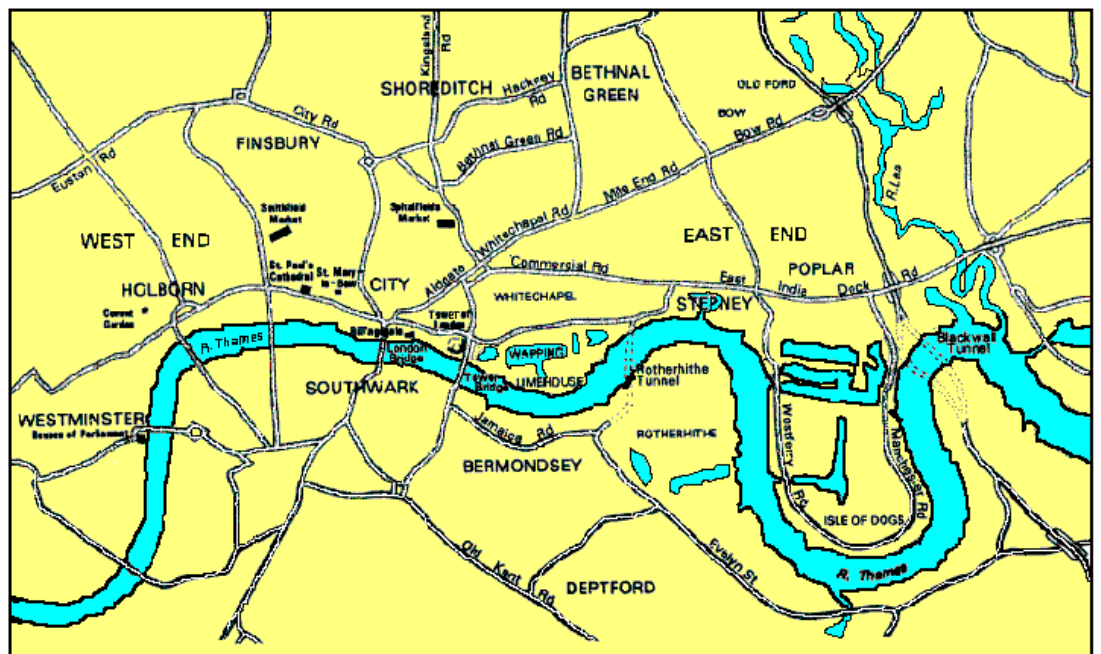
Map 2: London. The heartland of Cockney

By *Cockney* is currently meant the variety of English originally used in the East End of London. This does not correspond exactly to

any single neighbourhood or jurisdictional division, including roughly the following areas: Aldgate, Bethnal Green, Bow, Limehouse, Mile End, Old Ford, Poplar, Ratcliff, Shoreditch, Spitalfield, Stepney, Wapping and Whitechapel (see Map 2). As a whole they belong to the three districts of the City, Hackney and Tower Hamlets. However, according to the most traditional definition, a true *Cockney* is anyone born within the sound of the bells of St. Mary-le-Bow Church, Cheapside (London EC2)

2.1 Historical Outline

Etymologically the word Cockney means "cock's egg", coming from *cokene*, the old genitive of cock (OE *cocc, kok*), plus *ey* (OE *æg*; ME *ey*. Cf. German *Ei*, "egg"). This was a mediaeval term referring to a small, misshapen egg, supposedly laid by a cock and we first find it in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (1362):

"And I sigge, bi my soule,
I have no salt Bacon, we no
Cockneyes, bi Crist, Colopus
To maken"

(A.   VII, l. 272)

It soon came to be applied to a "pampered child" or "mother's boy", most probably through the Middle English *cocker* "pamper". It

made its first appearance with this meaning in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1386):

> "And when this jape is told another day,
> I sal been holde a daf, cokenay!"
>
> (*The Reeve's Tale*, line 4208)

Here it stands for "a waekling, a softie" or a "pampered child".

By the early 16th century, countrymen began to apply it to people born and brought up in cities and therefore thought to be weaker, as we read in Robert Whitinton's *Vulgaria* (1520):

> "This cokneys and tytylynges may abide no sorrow when they come to age. In this great citees as London, York the children be so nycely and wantonly brought up that comonly they can little good."

As an expression of disparagement and disdain, anyway, already by the 17th century, it was referred only to Londoners:

> "A *Cockney* or *Cockny*, applied only to one borne within the sound of Bow-bell, that is, within the City of London, which tearme came first out of this tale: That a Citizens sonne riding with his father into the country asked, when he heard a horse neigh, what the horse did the father answered the horse doth neigh; riding farther he heard a cocke crow, and said doth the cocke neigh too? and therefore Cockney or cocknie, by inuersion (sic!) thus: incock, q. incoctus i. raw or vnripe in Country-men affaires."
>
> (John Minsheu, *Ductor in linguas: The guide into tongues*, 1617)

Little by little, then, during the 17th century, the meaning of the word shifted from Londoners in general, only to those born within the sound of Bow bells. The reproachful phrase "our Cockney of London" (1611) thus came to indicate any person with no interest in life beyond the English capital.

The following century saw the term undergo a further shift, being related not only to people but also to the variety of language they spoke. This occurred through a process that we might call *meaning extension*. In Thomas Sheridan's *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762), we find the word applied for the first time to the dialect:

"[…] in the very metropolis [London] two different modes of pronunciation prevail, by which the inhabitants of one part of the town, are distinguished from those of the other. One is current in the City, and is called the cockney; the other at the court end, and is called the polite pronunciation. As amongst these various dialects, one must have the preference, and become fashionable, it will of course fall to that which prevails at court, the source of fashions of all kinds. All other dialects, are sure marks, either of a provincial, rustic, pedantic, or mechanic education; and therefore have some degree of disgrace annexed to them."

(*Lecture II*:. Pronunciation)

Further on, he lists some of the main pronouncing features, or *mistakes*, of the lower variety, not detaining himself from statements such as: "How easy it would be to change the cockney pronunciation, by making use of a proper method!". The invocation for a change of this kind seems to reveal that, not only the people called Cockney, but

also their by now homonymous dialect was being looked down upon in a disparaging and disdainful manner.

About the end of the 18th century another important work confirms the impression of the rise and catching on of this negative attitude towards Cockney. In his famous *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791) John Walker devotes the final part of the section on Ireland to his "[…] countrymen, the Cockney; who, as they are the model of pronunciation to the distant provinces, ought to be the more scrupulously correct.". He singles out four main faults of the Londoners (1st Pronouncing *s* indistinctly after *st*; 2nd Pronouncing *w* for *v*, and inversely; 3rd Not sounding *h* after *w*; 4th Not sounding *h* where it ought to be sounded, and inversely) also providing guidelines to eradicate them and thus concluding:

"[…] I have endeavoured to correct some of the more glaring errors of my countrymen; who, with all their faults, are still upon the whole the best pronouncers of the English language. For though the pronunciation of London is certainly erroneous in many words, yet, upon being compared with that of any other place, it is undoubtedly the best; that is , not the best by courtesy, and because it happens to be the pronunciation of the capital, but best by a better title; that of being more generally received: or, in other words, though people of London are erroneous in the pronunciation of many words, the inhabitants of every other place are erroneous in many more."

In the Middle English period, if we exclude the literary language, there had been no idea of a variety superior to all others. It seems that the growth in prestige of London English and its following

"being more generally received" were the outcome of the growth in importance of London itself. As the centre of governmental, legal, but, above all, business affairs, it was the place everyone, and merchants in particular, from all over the country had, one way or another, to turn to, thus being forced, willy nilly, to discard, or, at least, soften their native dialect, to adapt it to that of the capital. Of course, it was not the English spoken at Court that merchants had to switch to, which, obviously enough, was quite out of their ear's reach. Rather, it was the language spoken by local merchants and common people of the streets and many markets.

But it is right because of the importance as a model that Walker attaches and recognises to London, that he seems to take it at heart to point out that:

"The grand difference between the metropolis and the provinces is, that people of education in London are free from all the vices of the vulgar; but the best educated people in the provinces, if constantly resident there, are sure to be strongly tinctured with the dialect of the country in which they live. Hence it is that the vulgar pronunciation of London, though not half so erroneous as that of Scotland, Ireland or any of the provinces, is, to a person of correct taste, a thousand times more offensive and disgusting."

In the 18th century, the Cockney dialect made its first important appearance in literature. It did so mainly through characters in Charles Dickens's successful novels, Sam Weller in *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) probably being the most illustrious. One of the features por-

trayed by Dickens through his character is the supposedly Cockney habit of exchanging of v and w:

"'Vell, that's wery true, Sammy,' replied Mr Weller, mollified at once; 'but wot are you a doin' on here? Your gov'nor can't do no good here, Sammy. They won't pass the werdick, they won't pass it, Sammy.' […] 'Wot a perwerse old file it is!' exclaimed Sam, 'alvays a goin' on about werdicks and alleybis, and that. […]."

(Chapter 43)

Although many commentators have considered this characteristic to be only an invention by Dickens, which does not seem to be the case, if we think of Walker's list of Londoners' faults, it spread so much as to become the commonplace most usually associated with the dialect, at least in its literary transposition. It became so popular among writers that it kept being exploited long after it had ceased to be actually used as is confirmed in what George Bernard Shaw writes in an appendix to his *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1900):

"When I came to London in 1876 the Sam Weller dialect had passed away so completely that I should have given it up as a literary fiction if I had not discovered it surviving in a Middlesex village, and heard of it from an Essex one. […] in the eighties […] the obsolescence of the Dickens dialect that was still being copied from book to book by authors who never dreamt of using their ears, much less of training them to listen."

As we shall explain more in detail later on, Shaw did not limit himself to point out the obsolescence of the Dickens dialect, but, in

Pygmalion, he will put himself in line with the negative judgements on Cockney expressed by so many of his predecessors. In 1909 these attitudes even received an official recognition thanks to the report of *The Conference on the Teaching of English in London Elementary School* issued by the London County Council, where is stated that

"[…] the Cockney mode of speech, with its unpleasant twang, is a modern corruption without legitimate credentials, and is unworthy of being the speech of any person in the capital city of the Empire."

On the other hand, however, there started rising at the same time cries in defence of Cockney, which, besides, seem to have a more scientific foundation, as, for example the following one:

"The London dialect is really, especially on the South side of the Thames, a perfectly legitimate and responsible child of the old kentish tongue […] the dialect of London North of the Thames has been shown to be one of the many varieties of the Midland or Mercian dialect, flavoured by the East Anglian variety of the same speech […]."

(McBride, 1910: 8, 9)

No matter what the experts or the high-brows thought about it, Cockney was spreading beyond the traditional boundaries of the East End, not only into other parts of London, but even into neighbouring counties, as is confirmed by E. Gepp's complaint about "the ugly vernacular sound" of unliterary Londoners in his *An Essex Dialect Dictionary* (1923):

"Modern Cockney language has now crept in among us, and is creeping more and more, and we regret and resent it. […] The deadening influence of London is seen for many miles out […] the poison is in the air, and the blighting Cockney's *Sahfend* (Southend), *Borking* (Barking) and *Elestead* (Halestead) and the like show what we may come to. Heaven preserve us!"

(p. 150-51)

Already in 1938 William Matthews was able to write (1972[2]: 76):

"The Cockney dialect at the present time is extremely varied, for many reasons. The London area is too large and the population too mixed for any uniform system of pronunciation to exist, and such social as education have produced many modifications of even the characteristic sounds."

Nowadays degrees of Cockneyhood are perceptible all around the South-East of England, their relevance and diffusion varying according to such factors as social class, occupation, education, locality, etc., which I shall analyse further on.

We may conclude by summing up what we have seen so far about the change of meaning of the word *Cockney* through almost seven-hundred years, in the following way:

- Stage I (14th century): misshapen, malformed egg;
- Stage II (late 14th and 15th century): pampered, spoilt child;

- Stage III (16th century): any city dweller of any city (as opposed to countrymen);

- Stage IV (17th century): a Londoner (in particular, born within the sound of Bow Bells);

- Stage V (18th century): Londoners and their dialect.

Whereas Stages 1-4 are mostly specifications, and therefore *restrictions* of the meaning of the word, partly or completely rubbing out the previous one; Stage from 4 to 5 is, on the contrary an *extension*, as it not only keeps the previous meaning, but it attaches a new possible interpretation to the word in a semantically related area. Besides, it is worth pointing out that Stage from 4 to 5 also represents a change, or rather, an addition in the field of applicability of the term, namely from ethnography and sociology to linguistics. Given that both applications remain valid, we may better state that Cockney enters the domain of Sociolinguistics.

2.2 Rhyming Slang, Backslang and Slang

One of the most renowned and undoubtedly striking peculiarities of Cockney has always been its *Rhyming Slang*. Rhyming Slang is a kind of slang in which a word is replaced by another word or phrase that rhymes with it. It generally consists of a binary expression that rhymes with a single everyday word (McArthur, 1992: 868-69). Therefore, the slang phrase co-exists with the standard word and it is up to the speaker to decide which to use, the choice generally being

influenced by the context. As in the Old Germanic poetic tradition, the rhyming phrase is fixed and formulaic, variation being only chronological. The target word is more often than not a monosyllable, though sometimes it may be a disyllable. Polysyllables are definitely rarer. (Murdoch, 1983: 23-25). Sometimes the rhyme does not take place if the words making up the phrase are pronounced in RP, but only if a Cockney accent is used (see examples Nos. 11, 15 below). On other occasions, the rhyme is impure, or there may just be an assonance even in a London accent (see examples Nos. 8, 32 below). There are also cases in which the rhyme is pure both in a Cockney accent and in RP, but they may differ compared to each other (e. g. No. 29 below). Quite often the rhyming element is omitted, thus making the comprehension of the expression to the layman practically inaccessible (see examples Nos. 12, 16, 31, 37, 40, 42, 43 below). It has been argued that the drop of the rhyming element is a conscious practice to make the slang even more secret. It is more probable, given the humour with which Cockney Rhyming Slang is tinged all over, that it is just a form of abbreviation like so many others in every language or dialect. (for a detailed analysis of the rules governing this process see Murdoch, 1983). The dropping of the rhyming element, however, is not possible when both words are stressed and refer to a personal name (see example 52 below).

What follows is just a short list of examples. Some of these expressions have become so popular, that they are sometimes used even in Standard English, though colloquially.

1. *Adam and Eve*: believe. E g. "Would you Adam 'n' Eve it?"

2. *Apples and Pears*: stairs.

3. *Bees and Honey*: money. E.g. "I've run out of bees and honey."

4. *Berkshire Hunt*: cunt.

5. *Bird Lime*: time.

6. *Bottle and Glass*: arse.

7. *Brahms and Liszt*: pissed (drunk).

8. *Brass Tacks*: facts.

9. *Brick and Mortar*: water.

10. *Bristol Cities*: titties (breasts).

11. *Bull and Cow*: row (fight). E.g. "Last night we had a bull and cow."

12. *Butcher's Hook*: look. E.g. "Let's take a butcher's at that paper."

13. *Cain and Abel*: table. E g. "I was sitting at the Cain and Abel."

14. *Cat and Mouse*: house.

15. *Charing Cross*: horse.

16. *China Plate*: mate. E.g. "Me and me China."

17. *Cobbler's Awls*: balls, testicles.

18. *Dog and Bone*: phone.

19. *Donald Duck*: luck.

20. *Duke of Cork*: talk. E.g. "They've got ways to make you duke of Cork"

21. *Elephant's Trunk*: drunk. E.g. "to cop an elephant." (to get drunk)

22. Fisherman's Daughter: water.

23. *Frog and Toad*: road.

24. *Gates of Rome*: home. E.g. "Do you know the way to his gates of Rome?"

25. *God Forbids*: kids.

26. *Grasshopper*: copper (policeman).

27. *Half Inch*: pinch (to steal).

28. *Ham and Eggs*: legs. E.g. "She was standing on her ham and eggs."

29. *Hampstead Heath*: teeth.

30. *Holy Friar*: liar. E.g. "You're just a holy friar!"

31. *Jack Malone*: alone. E.g. "All on his Jack."

32. *Jack O'Brien*: Train.

33. *Jam Jar*: car. E.g. "I have my own jam jar."

34. *Jim Skinner*: dinner.

35. *Jimmy Riddle*: piddle (urinate).

36. *Lady Godiva*: fiver (a five pound note).

37. *Loaf of Bread*: head. E g. "Use your loaf!"

38. *Molly Malone*: phone.

39. *North and South*: mouth.

40. *Oxford Scholar*: dollar. E.g. "Lend me an Oxford."

41. *Peas and Pot*: hot.

42. *Pig's Ear*: beer. E.g. "Give me a Walter Scott [see No. 49] of pig's!"

43. *Rabbit and Pork*: talk. E.g. "She rabbits all the bird lime [see No. 4]"

44. Rory O'More: a. whore; b. floor; c. door. E.g. (c.) "Shut that Rory O'More!"

45. *Rosy Lea*: tea.

46. *Rub-a-Dub*: pub.

47. *Saucepan Lid*: quid. "It costs a saucepan lid."

48. *Tea Leaf*: thief. E.g. "You bloody tea leaf!"

49. Tit for Tat: hat.

50. Trouble and Strife: wife.

51. *Uncle Willy*: silly.

52. *Walter Scott*: pot.

53. *You and Me*: tea.

Sometimes there may be two or more ways to indicate the very same thing or concept (see examples Nos. 9 and 22; 20 and 43; 45 and 53 above); or there may be one expression indicating more ideas, according to the context (see example No. 44 above). A fair amount of phrases are merely names of people, either real, invented on purpose or legendary (see examples No. 1, 7, 13, 19, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 38, 44, 51, 52 above) or names of places (see examples No. 10, 15, 24, 29), regardless of their having or not connections with what they refer to.

Then there are also quite a few rhymes which, at a deeper analysis, mean more than they seem to do at a quick glance, the irony being underlying (see examples No. 11, 25, 30, 50 above). On other occasions, things are even more complicated, because the rhyming slang to refers to another already slang word (see examples Nos. 7, 26, 27, 36, 47 above). Given the undeniable lubricious and flippant tone of rhyming slang, allusions to taboo words are unavoidable (see examples Nos. 4, 6, 10, 17, 35 above).

Although many scholars have investigated and much has been written about the origin of Cockney Rhyming Slang, it still remains quite uncertain where it really lies.

As remembered by Julian Franklyn (1975: 10), John Camden Hotten writes in his *The Slang Dictionary* (1859):

"This cant, which has nothing to do with that spoken by the costemongers, is known in Seven Dials and elsewhere as 'the rhyming slang', or the substitution of words and sentences which rhyme with other words intended to be kept secret.[...] Unlike all other systems of cant, the rhyming slang is not founded upon allegory. […] I learn that the rhyming slang was introduced about twelve or fifteen years ago […]."

What seems to deserve credit about this statement is the time when rhyming slang would have started to catch on, that is the early Victorian Age. Some think it was born as a kind of secret language, mainly used by thieves and little criminals (crooks, pickpockets, pimps, small smugglers, etc.) in order not to allow the policemen or

coppers, to understand them. A support to this hypothesis is represented by *The Vulgar Tongue: a glossary of slang, cant, and flash words and phrases, used in London from 1839 to 1859* […] by one Ducange Anglicus who, in the Preface to the first edition, thus motivates:

> "This little volume has been printed with the view of assisting Literary Men, the Officers of the Law and Philanthropists, in their intercourse with Classes of English Society who use a different phraseology, only understood by their own fraternity."

Julian Franklyn himself only partly agrees with this opinion, proposing instead that rhyming slang must have been the product of some kind of verbal competition between Irishmen and Cockney working side by side in the London docks. The Londoners would have created it "as a means of mystifying 'the Micks[1]'". These, on their own part, would have taken up the gauntlet and introduced such expressions as *Rory O'More*. This explanation would account for the presence of so many Irish references and proper or legendary names in Cockney Rhyming Slang. At a time when employment in the London dockland mainly depended on casual works, navvies would easily slide into the Victorian underworld, thus enlarging the army of downtrodden beggars and thieves crowding the alleys of the capital and taking their slang with them.

Rhyming slang was also used by costermongers, hawkers, hucksters, tallyman and the like, especially at the old Covent Garden

vegetable and fruit market, at the Smithfields meat market, at the Billingsgate fish market and at all the other markets scattered in the East End (Petticoat Lane - now between Middlesex Street and Wentworth Street -, Bethnal Green Road, etc.).

Restricted to traders was probably another typically, though not exclusively Cockney feature, that is *Backslang*. This consists of speaking or writing words backwards, and unlike Rhyming Slang, there is little doubt it was originally devised to disguise words for trade purposes and for confounding the police. By using it, they could, for instance, sell the same item at different prices at once, according to whether they were dealing with a habitual customer or a stranger, the latter being at a loss before such an utterance as "It's owt [two] bob" turned to the initiate. Here are some examples: *yob* (sometimes modified to *yobbo*) for "boy"(Murdoch, 1983: 37 n. 14, points out that this word "comes in the main language to be a slang term for 'hooligan', 'rough' (male)." It is likely that in the transition from Cockney to Standard English the term undergoes a process of *meaning restriction* and *specification*. (After all, analogous phenomena have always been characteristic of English. This is, for instance, confirmed by the distinction of meanings of such words as *pork* (from Latin *porcus* through Old French) and *pig* (from OE *picga). Other similar pairs are: *ox/beef*; *sheep/mutton*; *calf/veal*; *deer/venison*; or again: *begin/commence*; *child/infant*; *freedom/liberty*; *hide/conceal*; *wish/desire*; etc.); *elrig* for "girl"; *ecilop* (sometimes modified to *slop*) for "police"; *egabac* for "cabbage"; *edgenaro* for "orange"; *rape* for

"pear"; *shif* for "fish"; *eno* for "one"; *owt* for "two"; *erth* for "three"; etc.

Cockney slang has always been strongly affected by other languages brought into the country by immigrants. We have already hinted at the Irish influence, but there are also more exotic sources of inspiration. So, for example, there are words from Romany, the language of the gypsies (chavvy: "a child"; *mush*: mate; etc.) or from Yiddish, the Germanic language used by Jews of Eastern and Central Europe (*clobber*: "clothes"; *gezumph*: "to swindle"; gelt: "money" (cf. German das *Geld*); *goy*: "non-Jew"; *schemozzle*: "a disturbance"; *schlemiel*: "a simpleton"; *spiel*: "to talk"; etc.). Sometimes the influence has come from temporary London emigrants: quite a few people during the British Empire, often spent years abroad, especially in Asia and Africa, thus acquiring scraps of the local tongues that they brought back to the East End when they came back (from Arabic: *ackers:* "money"; *bint*: "a girl"; from Hindi: *dekko:* "a look"; *doolally*: "mad" (from the name of a town in India, Deolali, where a British Army mental hospital was situated); etc.)

Other characteristics of Cockney slang are: abbreviations, from time to time with the addition of -*o* (e.g. aggravation = *aggro*); *euphemisms* (e.g. God blind me = *Cor blimey*); *run-together phrases* (e.g. What cheer! = *Wotcher!*)

We may conclude by pointing out that Cockney Rhyming Slang and Backslang seem both to be the continuation and adaptation of the Old Germanic poetic tradition and love for playing with words.

2.3 Cockney in literature

In 2.2 we saw that the first time the word *cockney* made its appearance in literature was in the 14th century in the works of William Langland and Geoffrey Chaucer. But although it was only in the 17th century that Cockney, no matter how despised, was officially recognised the status of dialect, we can assume that, London being the centre of culture in England already in the Elizabethan and Jacobean time, even such dramatists as John Heywood (1497-1580) and Thomas Middleton (1580-1627) must have had required here and there of the actors interpreting their plays to put on some kind of London accent. This in spite of the fact that nothing, or very little of the sort seems to emerge from the texts that have reached us.

William Shakespeare himself seems to have walked on the same steps as his predecessors, although such characters as Mistress Quickly in *Henry IV* seem to reveal more Cockney features than ever found before, mostly rendered through spellings unusual even for that time. Also the Fool in *King Lear* betrays such features, though it was up to the actor interpreting him to exaggerate or soften them, probably according to taste and target. And in Act II Scene IV line 117 we even find another example of the word *cockney* used in the sense of "city-dweller":

> "Cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels when put'em i' th' paste alive."

Ben Jonson (1572/3-1637) often made London life the subject of his satirical humour, and it is therefore no surprise that some of his characters present linguistic features that, although not consistent, may be ascribed to Cockney. As his contemporaries and followers, he did it mainly through misspellings, intended to represent pronunciations and expressions characteristic of vulgar London speech.

Another important contribution to our understanding of the features of early Cockney is represented by Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607-8), a comedy, once attributed also to John Fletcher, set in London.

But if the plays of the 16th and 17th centuries are only sprinkled with rare and inconsistent examples of Cockneyisms, their actual realisations, as we have seen, being left to performers, it is to the private writings of Londoners and their idiom, grammar and "auricular orthography", that we have to turn, in order to find more details of the early stages of the dialect. One of the most important texts of this kind is Henry Machyn's *Diary*, kept in the years 1550-63. As accurately remembered by Matthews, 1972[2]: 12-24, Machyn was a merchant-tailor, maker and furnisher of funeral cloths and trappings, and in his diary, among other things, he describes the great dinners of the merchant companies, the masques produced by the city companies and the inns of courts, and the events taking place in his parish:

"The xix day of Aprell was a wager shott in Fynsbere feld of the parryche of the Trenete the lytyll of vj men agaynst vj and one parte had xv for iij and lost the game: and after shott and lost a-nodur game […]"   (p. 132)

Useful evidence of the London pronunciation of the time is also provided by Machyn's spellings of place-names, in particular of streets and buildings of the City: *Smytfeld, Vestmyster, Mynsyon lane, Kanwykstrett* (Candlewick Street), *Lumbarstrett* (Lombard Street), *Wostrett* (Wood Street), etc.

Another important source of information regarding London speech in the 16th and 17th centuries can be found in the London parish books kept in the Guildhall Library. Mainly dealing with the upkeep of churches, the administration of their properties, the relief of the poor and the like, these documents were written by anonymous scriveners on behalf of churchwardens, generally traders of the parish, appointed to prepare the year's accounts. Given their rarely learned background and origin, they occasionally slid into idioms and phonetic spellings that best of all reveal at least some of the aspects of the London speech of the time when they were written. Once again Matthews (1972[2]: 19-22) makes a list of these misspellings, which include: a) use of short e in words which were commonly pronounced with short *i*: *consperacy, chelderyn, kendred, wretten, ef* (if), etc. b) short a for short *o*: *caffen* (coffin), *falowing, maps* (mops), *bande* (bond), etc. c) *e* for *a* in such words as: *stren* (Strand), *Jenuarie, texes*, etc. d) *ow* (most probably indicating /ao/) instead of *o*: *sowld, owlde, towle* (toll), *towld* (told), etc. e) long *a* and *ai* replaced by *i* or *y*: *chynes* (chains), *ordined, Rile* (rail), *strynge* (strange), etc. f) normal *ou* or *ow* is represented by *u*: *shutt* (shout), *shruds* (shrouds), *Suthe* (South),

utter (outer), etc. g) interchanged *w* and *v*. h) drop of initial *h* and its insertion elsewhere. i) occasional replacement of *th* by *f* or *v*: *frust* (thrust), *Feverstone* (Featherstone), etc.

In the 18th century the first signs of Cockneyisms leak out of letters contained in great novels. One such example is represented by Henry Fielding's *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743), in which the protagonist is himself a Cockney. But even more replete with Cockneyisms are letters in Tobias George Smollet's *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748).

The actor, dramatist and farce writer Samuel Foote (1720-77) made constant use in his works of dialect characters, parodying Irish-men, Scotchmen and City merchants. The latter are the object of his burlesque in particular in Taste (1752) and *The Mayor of Garrat* (1764). Jerry Sneak, the City penmaker protagonist of this last, is the first Cockney character to show confusion of w and v, later to become one of the strongest stereotypes attached to Cockneys in literature.

Written about the same years is *The Abecedarian* by school-master John Yeomans, in which he makes this rebuke:

"A is rank'd the first letter in the order of every alphabet; but the citizens of London have injuriously converted its eligible pronunciation to that of *e*."

But in order to find more than just impromptu comments on Cockney features we have to turn to the orthoepical works of James Elphinston (1721-1809) and in particular to his *Principles of English Grammar Digested* (1765), *Propriety Ascertained in her Picture*

(1787) and *Inglish* [sic!] *Orthography* (1790). Translating Martial from Latin he has recourse to Cockney to illustrate its traits.

The first scholar to openly defend Cockney was Samuel Pegge, who in his *Anecdotes of the English Language* (1803), tries hard to prove that the so-called London vulgarisms had indeed been used by such writers as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Dryden, Swift and many others.

An important work is also Pierce Egan's *Real Life in London* published in monthly parts starting from November 1821. A sort of guidebook to London scenes and London characters, this study does not tell us much new about Cockney pronunciation and grammar, but it provides us with valuable and *real* examples of slang, clichés and epithets, besides giving us interesting images of life in London in the early 19th century.

Appeared in 1837-38 is Cockney's *Adventures by Renton Nicholson*, in which the happier and more pleasant aspects of Cockney life are portrayed, including its slang and pronunciations.

We have already seen that Dickens definitely established with his novels a tradition of Cockney characters, but his contemporary William Thackeray as well, though not so fond of *vulgar* dialogue, contributed to the illustration of the London speech, especially in his burlesque *The Yellowplush Papers* (1840).

But probably the most important collection of Cockneyisms in the 19th century is represented by Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861). This work is basically a sociological

study of the life conditions of the London costermongers, hucksters, beggars and criminals carried out by having the protagonists themselves speak and describe their own lives in their own speech. The result is an unaimed at store of information on Cockney slang, pronunciation, idiom and grammar, rendered through conventions present also in other works of the time. The following example is taken from Matthews (1972[2]: 54):

"I vos at von time a coster, riglarly brought up to the business, the time vas good then; but, lor, ye used to lush at such a rate! About ten years ago, I ses to me-self, I say Bill, I'm blowed if this here game 'ill do any longer. I had a good moke and a tidyish box ov a cart; so vot does I do, but goes and sees von o' my old pals that gits into the coal-line somehow. He and I goes to the Bell and Siven Mackerels in the Mile End Road, and then he tells me all he knowed, and takes me along vith himself, and from that time I sticks to the coals."

(Vol. II, p. 97)

Punch or The London Charivari, the famous weekly magazine of radical political ideas, was founded in 1841 and closed down in 1992, and for these one-hundred and fifty-one years, thanks to its humorous cartoons and writings about people of all social classes and localities, it has always been a rich source of *real* language. If the first Cockney references were in the same line of tradition as Dickens, later on *Punch* began to publish a series of Cockney rhyming letters, written by one 'Arry (his real name was F. Anstey) to his pal Charlie, in which such conventions as w for v were abandoned and Americanisms made their appearance.

The first writer to make wide use of this new kind of Cockney dialect launched by *Punch* was A. W. Tuer in The Kawkneigh Awl-minek of 1883 (Wright, 1981: 17).

Another one who adopted the new manner was Edwin W. Pugh in *A Street in Suburbia* (1895), a biasless picture of ordinary life in Marsh Street. In his realist tales of London's East End life collected in *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894), and in his novel *A Child of the Jago* (1896), in which the violent boyhood of Dick Perrott in an East End slum off Shoreditch High Street is described, Arthur Morrison gives a bleak and vivid picture of this London area not very unlike Dickens's, thus contributing to make the already negative idea of Cockneys even more negative.

Towards the end of the 19th century Cockney started to become a staple of music hall songs, being particularly associated with "the pearly kings and queens", that is costermongers and their wives who wore (and still wear) garments covered with pearls buttons (Algeo in Machan & Scott, 1992: 172).

It was George Bernard Shaw who best epitomised the Cockney character in his play *Pygmlion* (1912). If Professor Higgins was inspired by Henry Sweet, the famous phonetician to whom he had been introduced in 1880, Eliza Doolittle, the poor Cockney flower girl, soon became the symbol of a whole category of people from the lower strata of society. Her language could but reflect her humble origin, thus reinforcing the overall negative attitude to it. And in the Preface to the play, Shaw wrote:

"The English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it. […] it is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him."

It is as if with Shaw we had reached the bottom of a process of pejorative attitudes towards Cockney, that had started some five centuries earlier.

Published in 1908, *A Room with a View*, by E. M. Forster, although set in Italy, is another example of the prejudices the English upper classes had about Cockneys.

In more recent times, Cockney has appeared in such a play as Steven Berkoff's *East* (1977), the subtitle of which "Elegy for the East End and Its Energetic Waste", seems to be indicative of a desire to give a new, no matter how cruel and raw, picture of the homeland of Cockney, its people and language.

In the early 80s a TV series called *East Enders* contributed to give even more popularity to the Cockneys.

Matteo Santipolo

Università di Bari

Dipartimento di Pratiche Linguistiche e Analisi di Testi

santipolo@libero.it

Bibliography

CRYSTAL, D. (1995), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MCARTHUR, T. (1992), (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MCBRIDE, M. (1910), *London's Dialect: an ancient form of English Speech*, London: Priory Press.

MACHAN, T. W. & SCOTT, C. T. (1992), (eds.), *English in its Social Contexts,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MATTHWES, W. (1972^2), *Cockney Past and Present*, London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

MILROY, J. & MILROY, L. (1993), (eds.), *Real English. The Grammar of English Dialects in the British Isles*, London: Longman.

MURDOCH, B. (1983), "Some Observations on London (Cockney) Rhyming Slang", in *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, vol. 7, November, (pp. 21-38).

SANTIPOLO, M. (2000), "A Socio-phonetic Description of Two Varieties of South-eastern British English" in *Annali della Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere dell'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia*, vol. 39, 1-2, pp. 277-321.

SANTIPOLO, M. (2001), "L'anomalia nel continuum sociolinguistico dell'inglese di Londra", *RILA*, a. XXXIII n. 2-3 Maggio-Dicembre, pp. 145-160.

TRUDGILL, P. (1990), *The Dialects of England*, London: Blackwell.

WRIGHT, P. (1981), *Cockney Dialect and Slang*, London: B.T. Batsford.