



Mind the Gap

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Mind the generation gap! Of language. Remember the days when we were elementary or intermediate learners of English at school? Probably all Hong Kong students in those days were told that British English was “the” English. Anyone using American spelling or pronunciation was heretic, or worse, a rustic.

But language is so sensitive to changes in culture, politics, economy and technology. British English today is not the same as it was yesterday.

A summer course at the University of Edinburgh has given me much insight into how English is used today, and how people see the so-called New English. Some, especially older Britons, are not terribly happy with the way things are going. Some find it more interesting than annoying. Take our course director for example. He has fun recording how his supposedly well-educated son talks differently from his parent:

Father:	Son:
Thank you.	Cheers.
No, thanks.	It's OK.
I am really upset.	I am absolutely gutted.
I don't want to discuss it.	Whatever.

Celebrities best demonstrate how the young talk today. *Private Eye* parodies the speech of the younger generation in a spoof account of interview with Stella McCartney, chic fashion designer. She spoke of what it was like growing up the daughter of Paul McCartney:

“*Like*, in many ways it was kind of normal. I mean *like* if you're the kid of the local vicar, then you're, *like*, the kid of the local vicar, and people say, *like*, there goes the kid of the local vicar, or whatever, and you're going to be treated *like* the kid of the local vicar... People are *like* always coming up and they're, *like*, how's your dad? So I'm *like*, yeah, how's YOUR dad? I mean, *like*, why are they always *like* coming up and saying, *like* how's your dad? Is it just because I'm the daughter of Paul McCartney?”¹

Like is, *like*, becoming, *like*, the trendiest conversational filler. So much so that a magazine parent forum discusses how to stop youngsters from saying *like* so abusively. One suggestion is saying *like* twice as frequently as they do and they will for sure stop it within one week.

Pronunciation is another bone of contention. People loyal to the Queen's English are complaining because the younger generation prefer “skedule” to “schedule” and “tomayto” to “tomato”. They are also losing to the scandalous Great Stress Shift, which accentuates misCHIEvous, conTROversy, CONtribute, REsource, PROgressing, PROtester, TRANSLator, Unique...

While Americanism takes the biggest share of blame, other forces are blatantly at work. The BBC now prefers their weathermen with local accents. Received Pronunciation sounds pedantic. In vogue is Estuary English, perfected by Victoria Beckham and Jamie Oliver and many others who may say they are just really “ornry peepaw” and don't need that “hassaw from the meedyur”.² Even their Oxford-educated Prime Minister may drop his h's and t's in an attempt to reach out to the masses.

Politicians are not alone in playing on linguistic overt familiarity. The use of surnames was once something old-fashioned and starchy. So instead of *Dear Mr Blair*, banks and hotels now begin their promotional letters with *Hi, Tony*. But first-name intimacy no longer sells so well as it used to. Today the more familiarly a stranger addresses you, the less friendly he or she can seem.³

Plain English definitely sounds friendlier and communicates better. Many have gone further by making all forms of English conversational. Loads of new words and usages are casually created everyday. It is *so not a surprise* to be asked in a highbrow restaurant, “Have you been *menued*?” If you *google* something and get nil result today, don't worry, you will get some tomorrow.

I wonder if orthodox British English is still a preferred choice for schools in Hong Kong. The differences among Englishes resulting from geographical distance are quickly diminishing. It is the speed with which they change that takes our breath away. Shall we catch up or hold back? Anyway, mind the gap.



¹ *Private Eye*, July 2003.
² “... ordinary people ... hassle from the media” *Private Eye*, February 2000.
³ *The Independent*, 28 April 2004.

Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future.
John F. Kennedy