

# Even British people can't speak English properly

by A. J. Dalton

Everyone knows that you can study the English language for years and still not understand a native speaker of English when you meet one. Everyone knows that native speakers say a lot of things that you can't find in any dictionary. Well, here's a secret for you: a lot of British people can't understand each other either!



There are different regional accents across the UK, and a number of regions have several different dialects, that is, they have their own unique vocabulary and grammatical phrases. There were at least six different accents indigenous to London the last time I counted.

Worse than that, it is not just where a person is born in the UK that decides their accent. For example, a language and its accents often vary across class or level of education. Another example is how language can differ among age groups in the UK. The words and pronunciations used by young people in the UK can be radically different compared with those used by adults.

## Yoof culture

The word 'yoof' is a slang spelling of 'youth'. Some people consider 'yoof' to be a negative term, since its pronunciation is easier and lazier than 'youth'. Other people see the term as positive, because it describes how young people are creating their own language, concepts and identity. When parents find it difficult to understand their children, the children can say more things without the censorship of their parents. In this way, young people are starting to find freedom, independence and self-expression. They are creating a 'yoof culture'.

It is not possible to come up with a complete list of words used by yoof. By the time the list was completed, it would be out of date. New words come and go like fashions. However, a few features of the yoof style of language are as follows:

- instead of saying something like 'That's good!' or 'I understand', yoof will use a single adjective like 'Safe!', 'Sorted!', 'Sound!', 'Cool!' or 'Wicked!'
- instead of 'She then said no!', yoof will say 'She was like: no!'
- instead of '... if you understand what I'm saying', yoof will say 'kindathing' or 'sortathing'
- instead of 'think', 'the', 'that', 'what' and 'because', yoof will say 'fink', 'da', 'dat', 'wot' and 'coz'

- instead of 'She's attractive!', yoof will say 'She's fine!' or 'She's fit!'
- instead of using different tag questions like '... isn't it?', '... can't you?' or '... don't they', yoof will use 'innit' (e.g. 'It's hot, innit!', 'You can dance really well, innit!' or 'They always say that, innit!')
- instead of using 'very' or 'really', yoof will use 'well' (e.g. 'I'm well tired' or 'You well got it wrong!')
- instead of 'I don't care!', a yoof will say 'Whatever!'.

## New social and political language

Certain groups of society feel threatened by 'yoof culture' or by the British working classes having more social freedom. As a result, a negative term now commonly used in the UK is 'chav'. It is an insult and is meant to describe someone who is uneducated and anti-social (e.g. 'He's a chav!'). A young person who wears a jacket with a hood (after all, it rains a lot in the UK) is sometimes called a 'hoodie'. It is a negative term and suggests that the young person is interested in committing crime.

## Where does that leave us?

Learners of English often feel that the best test of their English is how well they can talk to a native speaker. Yet learners should not worry about communicating with native speakers so much. Research commissioned by the British Council shows that 94 per cent of the English spoken in the world today is spoken between non-native speakers of the language. In fact, when we think about 'international English', there is no such thing as a native or non-native speaker. The UK no longer owns the English language.

### Activity 1: Matching

Here are words from the article. Match the words with similar meanings. One answer is given.

- 1 term (c)
  - 2 indigenous
  - 3 vary
  - 4 insult
  - 5 commonly
  - 6 consider (something) to be
  - 7 however
- a see (something) as
  - b often
  - c word (1)
  - d negative term
  - e differ
  - f but
  - g native

### Activity 2: True or false

According to the article, are the following statements true (T) or false (F)?

- 1 The British keep some words a secret from each other.
- 2 There are exactly six different English accents in London.
- 3 'Yoof' is used as a negative term by some.
- 4 Yoof are lazy.
- 5 By using their own language, yoof can avoid their parents' control.
- 6 Hoodies are criminals.
- 7 Learners of English should try to speak to native speakers of English more.

### Activity 3: Multiple choice

For each question, choose the correct yoof answer.

- 1 Why didn't you do your homework?
  - a Sound!
  - b Whatever!
- 2 Have you seen the new girl at our school?
  - a Kindathing!
  - b She's well fit!
- 3 I've bought some new shoes, innit!
  - a That's good.
  - b Wicked!

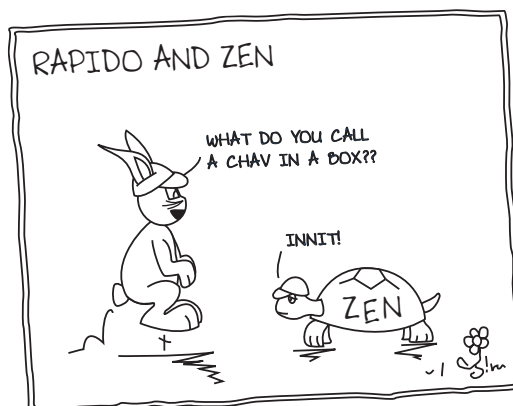
## Fun corner

Find the odd one out in each set of three words.

- 1 a youth  
b teen  
c chav
- 2 a cool  
b whatever  
c safe
- 3 a various  
b common  
c different
- 4 a freedom  
b censorship  
c control
- 5 a criminal  
b identity  
c self-expression
- 6 a well  
b radically  
c often
- 7 a decide  
b consider  
c think about

## Word of the day

A young person wearing a jacket with a hood is negatively described as a 'hoodie'.



- Answers
- Activity 1  
2 g  
3 e  
4 d  
5 b  
6 a  
7 f
- Fun corner  
1 c  
2 b  
3 b  
4 a  
5 a  
6 c  
7 a
- Activity 2  
1 F  
2 F  
3 T  
4 F  
5 T  
6 F  
7 F
- Activity 3  
1 b  
2 a  
3 b