

Why babies *love* our accent

Devon's distinctive accent is far from vanishing, says language psychologist DR LAURENCE WHITE

Say the word paw. Now try pore. If the second one sounds different, with an 'r' at the end, your accent has classic Devon colouring.

Happily, the Devon accent conjures up positive associations not just for locals but all over Britain. A recent ComRes poll for ITV found the Devon accent was perceived as the friendliest in Britain - 65% of the 4000 Britons polled thought the accent had friendly associations and only 4% said Devonian sounded unfriendly. And in films like *The Hobbit*, friendly characters often have West Country accents, whilst baddies tend to speak with Received Pronunciation or something resembling Cockney.

For Devon though, it's more than just friendliness. There are proud historical associations with the Devonian accent going back centuries. After the Pilgrim Fathers founding of Plymouth Massachusetts, waves of immigrants left the West Country, taking their "r" with them across the Atlantic. The folk memory of those settlers can be heard in most accents of American English today.

New research from Plymouth University now shows that local babies, well before their second birthday, prefer to hear words with that characteristic final 'r'.

"We tested Plymouth-based infants at 20



The Babylab team at Plymouth University, including the Babylab frog.

months old," says Dr Caroline Floccia of Plymouth University's Baby Lab.

"For half the babies, their mothers and fathers were Devonian, whilst the others had parents with non-local accents. All babies recognised words like 'tiger' and 'bear' only when pronounced with the final 'r'." Surprisingly, this happened even for babies who did not hear rhotic [final-r] accents at home."

"Children end up talking like their peers not their parents," says Cornwall-based language researcher Dr Lucy Ellis.

Our accent and the words we use are

tremendously important in our friendships, particularly in those sensitive early years. If an accent stands out in the school playground, most children quickly change how they speak in order to fit in. The Plymouth research shows that our chameleon accents start very young.

Because children and teenagers are linguistically adventurous, new words and ways of speaking can spread rapidly if they help to maintain social ties.

This means that language is constantly changing. Every generation thinks their version of English is the norm.

In fact, it is always different from how their parents spoke and how their children will end up speaking.

The English 'r' sound - more similar to a vowel than abrupt consonants like 'd' or 't' - easily gets weakened or dropped.

Children take a while to master that vague, tricky 'r' and often substitute the easier 'w'. And 'r' can be lost after vowels without seriously affecting the power of our spoken words to express what we mean. Dropping 'r', *sore* and *saw* sound the same, but their meanings are unlikely

Baby talk

British babies know fewer words than Americans of the same age. Research in the Plymouth Baby Lab confirms what has long been suspected. Local babies only recognise words at 11 months old that US-born infants know at least three months

sooner. This transatlantic difference in word knowledge is consistent and persists until at least two years of age, but no-one knows why.

"The vocabulary difference may arise from the different speech styles that Americans and Britons use to talk to babies," says the Baby Lab's

Dr Caroline Floccia. Americans tend to exaggerate the musicality of their voice, with big swoops in pitch and long, high vowels. "We are now investigating whether this exaggerated style helps babies to focus on speech and to extract the individual words."



Noticing a green light as part of the language experiments at the Babylab, Plymouth University.

to be confused in conversation. In Britain, that ‘r’ has been disappearing from the ends of words for centuries. While Shakespeare would probably have rolled the final ‘r’ sound in his name, just a few decades later, Londoners were losing it for good. The dropped ‘r’ has been spreading slowly north and west ever since.

But despite everything, the ‘r’ persists in Devon accents.

‘Children end up talking like their peers, not their parents’

“Plymouth has a more stable rhotic accent than Cornwall,” says Lucy Ellis.

One reason might be the shifting population of Cornish coastal towns and villages, so that children grow up hearing a mix of accents. Devon towns and cities like Plymouth may provide a more consistent ‘r’ for children to imitate.

“Iconic features of accents, such as the Devon ‘r’, persist and can even be exaggerated because they serve as badges

of identity,” says Dr Dominic Watt of the University of York, co-author of ‘English Accents and Dialects’.

Because there are few rhotic English accents nowadays, that tell-tale ‘r’ marks Devon speech as distinctive. The ‘r’ affects the sound and length of the next-door vowels as well, lending unmistakable colour throughout Devonian conversation.

And our greatest wordsmith spoke in an accent much closer to Devonian than Received Pronunciation or Estuary English.

“Devonians could fairly claim that their rhotic accent is a living reminder of the true Shakespearean form of English,” says Dominic Watt. As the budding Devonians in the Plymouth Baby Lab show, this historic, resonant style of speech – every ‘r’ clearly sounded – looks set to continue into the next generation. ■

If you are interested in contributing to research on language development and have a child aged 0 to 6 years, contact the Plymouth Babylab at Plymouth University on 01752 584865 or visit www.plymouthbabylab.org. Dr Laurence White lectures internationally on the psychology of language and is based at Plymouth University.

Starting early

We react to speech, particularly our mother’s, even in the womb.

New-born babies already prefer to hear their mother speaking rather than another woman with a similar accent.

Until three months old, the larynx (voice box) is high in the throat, so that babies – like chimpanzees and orangutans – can feed and breathe at the same time.

Once the larynx drops, babies can start babbling their first true speech sounds rather than just gurgles and giggles.

All babies, whatever language they are learning, babble in the same way to start with – “mamama”, “dadada”, “bababa”...

Babies who are learning sign language will babble – with their hands – at the same stage as hearing babies.

By ten months old, you can tell what language their parents speak from how a baby babbles.

Psychologists have shown that babies understand the meaning of words before they can say them.

At six months, babies can already link the words “Mummy” and “Daddy” to photographs of their parents.