

BEN CRYSTAL AND DAVID CRYSTAL

YOU SAY POTATO

A BOOK ABOUT ACCENTS

MACMILLAN

PROLOGUE: AT HOME WITH THE CRYSTALS

BEN I must have been around sixteen years old when I walked into the house I grew up in and unwittingly dropped a linguistic bombshell.

As I strolled into the kitchen, slung my school bag down and began to make a cup of tea, my father immediately stopped what he was doing, looked up, and raised his (not inconsiderable) eyebrows.

I checked about me. There was no original copy of Johnson's *Dictionary* on my person, nor did I have one of the fabulously rare original Shakespeare First Folios in my satchel. I was not wearing my *To split, or not to split, that is the infinitive . . .* T-shirt; I hadn't left the milk out, or the tea-bag in.

Clearly, then, I must have *said* something interesting.

Dad frowned, like a baffled but not unkindly owl, eyebrows still hovering a few inches above his spectacles. He leaned forward excitedly, as an entomologist might if a beetle had suddenly rolled over onto its back and held aloft a tiny sign which read 'tickle my tummy'.

D – What did you say, Ben?

I shifted uncomfortably as I tried to recall what I'd

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muttered that had piqued his interest. This, it should be noted, was not a new phenomenon. Over the previous couple of years, I had, it seemed, returned to the house with an assortment of linguistic fascinations, sweetmeats, and chew-toys for my father.

Wicked – meaning ‘fantastic’ – dominated one family meal. *Dark* – as a negative happening – compassed an entire weekend. An experiment (when I was twelve) over Sunday lunch with a word whose meaning I wasn’t entirely sure of (‘git’) quickly brought me to the realization that, whatever it meant, it was not complimentary.

I thought back to what I’d said when I walked in the door, and ran over it again in my head. I couldn’t think what it might be. So I mumbled the whole phrase once more, and, of course, foolishly fell down the rabbit hole.

– I said, I hate my new school schedule. It’s all doubles, and *Frau Schmidt*, if that’s her *real* name, which I *doubt*—

D – Schedule?

I blinked.

– Yeah. My new schedule.

D – Schedule?

– Yeah. Schedule.

D – Schedule.

– Daaaad. Schedule.

This was like taking some sort of lie-detector test, or being grilled by Scientologists. The repetitiveness was beginning to numb my brain.

D – You mean . . .

And here the shark showed its teeth.

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D – Shhhhedule?

– Yeah . . . I said cautiously, aware of the ground starting to slip under my feet. 'S what I said. Schedule, I mumbled.

D – Ah no, ha, you said *skedule*.

– Yeah. Skedule, shedule, Shrewsberry, Shrowsberry, sconn, scown. What's the diff?

D – The diff, my boy, he said, getting up to pour me a rather adult-looking glass of wine, is America.

And then I sat down, and we began talking about why.

DAVID I have to say it did surprise me when I first heard Ben say 'skedule'. And I was also surprised to realize that *he* didn't realize where his pronunciation had come from. It wasn't like the two pronunciations of *scone* or the two of *Shrewsbury*. They have histories arising out of the way different accents have developed in Britain. No, this was, indeed, one of the first signs that American English pronunciation was beginning to have a long-term impact on British English accents. Because it wasn't just Ben who was saying this. All his friends were too.

And, eventually, the rest of my four children. There was an interesting transitional period, somewhere in the early 1990s, when the two eldest ones (a decade older than Ben) were saying 'shedule', and the two youngest ones were saying 'skedule'. But they all say 'skedule' now.

As do I – when I'm talking to them. And when I'm not, I continue to say 'shedule', on the whole. So I have two pronunciations of this word in my repertoire these days. My personal

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speech is a sign of transitional times: the Old Pronunciation World meeting the New.

Why the early 1990s? In fact, people had begun to use the American pronunciation of this word earlier, but it was sporadic and idiosyncratic, reflecting individual encounters with American English. Any Brits who had spent some time in the US, and who enjoyed the experience, would probably come back with their accent modified in some way. But Ben had never been to the US, and was illustrating something that was affecting a whole generation. What caused that?

In a word, TV. And especially sitcom TV. Just think of the way in which American sitcoms arrived on British television from the 1950s onwards. The oldest readers of this book will remember *I Love Lucy*, first aired in 1951. Slightly less old readers will have happy memories of *The Munsters*, *The Monkees*, and *The Addams Family*, all from the sixties. Then the sitcom numbers rapidly grew. Among the most popular in the seventies were *The Brady Bunch* and *M*A*S*H*. In the eighties, *The Cosby Show* and *Cheers*. As Ben became a teenager, he watched several of these. It was the TV era. The Internet was still a decade away. And then, at the very end of the eighties, the Really Big One: *The Simpsons*.

But actually, Ben's 'skedule' couldn't have come from *The Simpsons*, as – if the online scripts are to be trusted – none of the characters use that particular word at all in the episodes aired in the first few years of the show. But it does turn up in other series that he was watching at the beginning of the 1990s, such as *Northern Exposure*. The pilot episode in 1990 sees Joel, a New York doctor newly arrived in a town in

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Alaska, wanting to leave by bus. Ruth-Ann asks him, 'Would you like a schedule?' And we hear the word again a few seconds later when Joel tries to escape from his waiting patients: 'I have a bus schedule,' he says. *Sked-* both times.

Schedule, of course, is just one of several American pronunciations that have spread around the English-speaking world. Think of *anti-* rhyming with *tie* rather than *tea*, or *ate* rhyming with *late* rather than *let*. Think of the second syllable of *tomato* sounding like *mate* rather than *maht*, or the first syllable of *progress* with a short 'o' (as in *hot*) rather than a long one (as in *oh*). Then there are all those words where the stress has shifted from the second syllable to the first, as with *address*, *magazine* and *research*, or the first to the second, as with *garage* and *frontier* (as in 'Space – the Final Frontier').

With *Star Trek*, *Friends*,* *Frasier*, *Seinfeld*, and many other

* B – Agreed, Dad. *Friends* probably did more than any other show to skew the way that people of my generation now speak English. Filmed in Los Angeles and set in New York, performed by actors from LA, Massachusetts/Canada, Alabama, LA again, Massachusetts again, and amazingly, one actually from New York City (Rachel, Chandler, Monica, Phoebe, Joey, and Ross, in that order), I've probably seen 98 per cent of the ten** series of *Friends* that were produced, and I've probably seen a few of those five times over. I'm aware this makes me something of a novice.

** B – For the record, there are 5,760 minutes of *Friends* available to watch: 10 seasons at 24 episodes per season at 24 minutes per episode. That's (not allowing for longer episodes, or DVD extras) 96 full hours, straight, without a snack-break. I'm pretty sure in 2004 I'd have recognized Matthew Perry's voice before I recognized my cousin's. Could I BE any more accommodating?

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hugely successful shows following, the spread of American usages among young people was inevitable. But America doesn't explain the whole story of modern English pronunciation. In fact, by the time you get to the end of this book, you'll see that it accounts for only a small part of the extraordinary soundscape that we call 'English accents'.

INTRODUCTION: THE SOUND OF BLUE

BEN Flash forward ten years. This is how it is when you're recording a voice-over for a TV or radio commercial: you sit in a small, soundproofed booth. There's water, sometimes a hot drink. A selection of branded pens and pencils. A script, a microphone, perhaps some ambient lighting. A book stand. And a window.

Through the window, there are *lots* of people. Quite close to the window is the engineer, who usually remains silent during the session, trying not to roll his eyes. Behind the engineer, on couches, chairs, or just stalking around, are the clients, the marketing department, the director, exec producers, and the advertising company project leaders (all surrounded by magazines, fruit, biscuits, or a 'quirky' jar of sweets, and legion empty caffeine delivery devices).

You have four words printed on the script. You are the voice of a national and international advertising campaign. The four words are, 'Say hello to tomorrow'.

You are being paid to say these four words exactly as they sound in the heads of the twenty-two people staring at you on

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the other side of the glass. Your palms, trying not to sweat, lie flat in front of you on the green cloth* table top.

Over the last six months, perhaps a year, these four words have been whittled down from *thousands*, and They have chosen YOU to bring them to life for, despite being incredibly good at their individual jobs, they have little to no capacity to articulate the sound in their heads into words that are in any way, shape, or form, useful to another sentient being.

But it's not YOU, it's ME, and now they are all beaming those words through the glass towards me, hoping they will fly out of my mouth, through the microphone, into the recording desk and back onto the screen, where the film they have feverishly sculpted waits patiently, each frame perfectly aligned to try to persuade the general public to spend the maximum amount of money on their particular product.

Sometimes their lips move, the engineer having flicked a switch which stops the sound of their room from entering my headphones, and my knuckles whiten as I try not to let paranoia rise in my stomach: they're not talking about recasting me, they're just . . . no, they are probably trying to recast me.

A *click* in my ear.

Exec – Yeah, hi, er, Bill, sorry, Ben, ha, can you er . . . can you just forget it's *raining* outside—

– Raining?

Exec – Yeah, you sound kinda . . . sad.

* Baize, so when you put a pencil or glass of water down, it makes less noise. Aside from the sounds you spill into the mic, your presence must be Trappist-like.

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– OK . . .

Exec – And could you say it more, er, blue.

– Blue. Like, the colour?

Another *click*. Lips. *Click*.

Exec – Yeah. Wait. Yeah! Aquamarine.

– . . .

Smile.

– Sure thing. No problem.

Engineer – Rolling. Take twelve.

Click. I hear exhalation in the word *twelve*.

The onscreen countdown starts, the film rolls, then the background sound finishes, and just before the logo pops up, I take a deep breath, and hold it – so the take doesn't have the sound of my breath in it – and—

Pause. Let me explain. There are two ways I can solve this particular problem of how, *in the next four seconds*, to turn the way that I said four words a minute ago into a completely different way for the *twelfth* time, while following the note of 'Aquamarine', *while* trying to figure out how on earth twenty-two opinions have coalesced into 'More blue'. Thanks to the somewhat passive-aggressive mention of the weather outside, I'm pretty sure they don't mean 'depressed', which worryingly means they want me to convey actual colour with the tone of my voice.

I have two main options here – three, if you count hiding under the desk.* The first is to vary the register, deepen my

* Which I may or may not have done during my first and only job as a lighting-board operator. I didn't know which button to press and so, from underneath the desk, blindly pressed them all, momentarily

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voice maybe, think of a happy seascape – azure by white sand, wooden tables sinking into dunes – close my eyes, smile . . .

Or I could do the second, I could think of home, the coast of Wales, and bring a different *colour** or *character* into my voice. This naturally happens when I speak in the accent of my home, or my university county of Lancashire, or Somerset, or London, or any of the accents that, by this relatively early point in my acting career, I had mastered. I made a choice. Stuck with my natural RP accent.

Say hello to tomorrow.

I held my breath again.

Lips.

Click.

Engineer – OK, you're done.

– Yeah, we're done?

Engineer – . . . Yep.

– Great. I'll come out.

I'm so fired.

Exec – Thank you so much, perfect. Got there in the end.

turning the end of what had begun as a very fine production of a Pinter play into a disco.

* Rather than 'hue', *Colour* is making a word sound like it should do. Think of the words 'majesty' and 'dustbin'. You can say both with the same vocal colour if you want, but one has a colour that shines and sparkles with gold, and the other is dusty, dull, and dirty. As an actor, you get used to making a word sound like its colour. At least, if you like being paid, you do.

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– Aw! Thanks all!

Yep. Definitely didn't give them what they they wanted. I did a blocky, solid wave to the room at large – I had not been introduced to anyone when I arrived, only told to go sit in the booth – so even this desultory, soundproofed farewell seemed futile, not that anyone was looking in my direction.

For the whole of the previous year, my accent – the particular blend of place and experience that makes me – well, *me* – had been the sound of 'tomorrow'. Whatever magic these people heard in my voice fitted their work and dreams perfectly – and then, just like that, the campaign no longer suited my type of 'blue', which is the simple, cold-hearted nature of showbiz, ladles and jelly spoons.

So yeah. The next day, I totally did get fired from the gig. *C'est la vie*.

Like scones and clotted cream in Devon, or wasps in a summer London pub, accents are all around us, everywhere we go. They're among the most personal parts of ourselves that we show to the world, revealing our life history and experiences to date simply by the way we sound our speech.

In my work as an actor, voice-over artist, or producer of Shakespeare, accents come up a lot – and with a linguist father and speech-therapist mother, when I head home to North Wales it's often a tea-time conversation.* How are they used? Why do we have them?

* It's *always* fun-times at the Crystal residence.

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Accents lie at the heart of what makes us human. We can use make-up or get plastic surgery to look different, and our choice of clothes sends an incredibly strong signal about how we'd like everyone else to perceive us. When I wear a suit, I'm businesslike; I wear jeans and a hoodie in a cafe on a Wednesday afternoon, I'm a creative; sandals and a smile on the beach (trunks too – it's not *that* sort of beach) show I'm comfortable with my body. A burqa, a kilt, tattoos, or glasses – they all tell different stories of our lives.

But an accent is a personality flag that we all fly with brighter colours than any garment, and most of us can do little to hide it. They make us who we are, and can influence the way we think – something advertising account managers, listening out for *exactly* the right shade of blue, know all too well.

The technical term for my base accent – the one I use without thinking – is 'modified RP', a slightly rougher version of Received Pronunciation, the classic 'BBC' English accent that we'll meet properly later in this book. I was born in Ascot, raised near Reading, and grew up in North Wales.* Then I went to Lancaster University, so I also have their short 'a' in my accent (I say *bath* as often as I say *baaaath*).

Then Lahndan to train as an actuh, so there's a bit o' the ol' Cockney in me pipes too. And I travel a fair bit, with a bunch of friends in the States, so my accent has a bit of a transadlandic quality to it, as I 'flap' my *ts* making them sound like *ds*. I often tell my dawg to seddle down while I boil

* Soo whhhenevuh ai goo hooome ai tauk a bit laik this laik.

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the keddle. So my modified RP is very much a mongrel accent, which will randomly slip its leash and head off into a different part of the world.

Despite my accent being somewhat autonomous, it's mine and I'm fiercely protective of it. It's me. Once – and only once – I made the foolish mistake of correcting someone, a girl, my girlfriend, on the way she pronounced something* – it's as personal a comment as any I know.

I remember it beginning to change into this accent mish-mash. I'm aware that at some point in my twenties I started saying *conCRETE*, instead of the British *CONcrete*, and sometimes, yes, even *adverTISEment* instead of *adVERTisement* – a litmus test if ever there was one of which side of the Atlantic you were raised, sorry, brought up.

Back in the nineteenth century it was the absolute norm to talk about the thing Juliet looks out from, and Romeo tries to climb, as a

bal-COH-ny

and some people hated the fact that there were IDIOTS who would pronounce it

BAL-con-y

but eventually the standard pronunciation changed. Such knee-jerk judgements of others form a big part of what this book is about. These vocal-melodic shifts or changes in stress patterns occur all the time. As groups of people splinter and travel to different land masses, a change slowly rumbles to

* OK, yes, EX-girlfriend.

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the surface of common usage as they attempt to demonstrate their individuality from their country of origin. Judgement of how they sound is a natural follow-on.

But while this book looks at what our accents say about us – and what they say about others – it is also a geographical tour through the English-speaking world, and a journey back in time to learn more about *why* we speak the way we do.

We'll look at what accents have to say about social status, and the rise of 'Received Pronunciation' – the 'posh', stereotypically British accent.

We'll look at how Shakespeare might have actually pronounced the lines from his own plays, and share some of the excitement of producing his work in OP – Original Pronunciation – for the first time in centuries.

And we'll also look at the increasing dominance of American English, and the question of whether our beloved local accents will eventually die out.

But before we get there, we need to confront the elephant in the room and set down what an accent actually *is*. And for that, I need m'father, Professor David Crystal. This book is about accents, and while accents do form a large part of my *art*, this is Dad's *craft*.

Over to you, Pops.

QUESTION: WHAT IS AN ACCENT?

DAVID As Ben's suggested, the heart of the answer is the notion that accents express our identity – who we are, which part of the country we come from, or where we belong socially or professionally. And identity is a very emotional issue.

We need to be clear what we're talking about, when we refer to someone's 'accent'. Accents have to be distinguished from dialects. An accent is a person's distinctive pronunciation. A dialect is a much broader notion: it refers to the distinctive vocabulary and grammar of someone's use of language. If you say *eether* and I say *iyther*, that's accent. We use the same word but pronounce it differently. But if you say *I've got a new dustbin* and I say *I've gotten a new garbage can*, that's dialect. We're using different words and sentence patterns to talk about the same thing. This book is just about accents.

Usually, when people talk about accents, they're thinking geographically. A pronunciation shows you come from a particular part of a country, or – in the case of English, now used all over the world – from a particular country. If you

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pronounce the first syllable of *lieutenant* as 'loo', you're American – or come from a part of the world influenced by American English. If you pronounce it like 'left', you're British, or British-influenced – which is why it's 'left-' in Australia and Canada.

But often an accent does more than point to a region. It tells you about a person's social background – the social class they belong to, or their educational history, or their ethnic or religious affiliation. If we were to explore the personal histories of Ben and someone else, that girl, his ex-girlfriend, we'd find social factors in the way they were brought up that account for their different preferences. Most people remember having some feature of their pronunciation corrected by their parents, or by a teacher in school. As adults, some go out of their way to change their accent, because they want to sound like people from a social class they aspire to.

There's a third function of accent: it can tell you what job a person does. Listen to lawyers and judges talking in court, or ministers giving a sermon, or drill sergeants haranguing their squads, or football commentators describing a game, and you're hearing occupational accents. These professionals don't talk in that way when they're off-duty. A household resounding to the excited tones of 'You 'orrible little man!' or 'They think it's all over!' would be an unusual place indeed.

And we mustn't forget the individual function of accent: it can convey our personal identity to the rest of the world. This is the recognition factor. We recognize someone we know from their voice. It might be a family member, a neighbour, a public figure, or a personality on radio or television. We can

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do this because no two people have exactly the same accent and voice quality.

The sound of our voice is produced by the configuration of the organs in our vocal tract. The shape of our tongue, the height of our palate, the thickness of our vocal cords, the size of our nose, the width of our windpipe, the contour of our lips . . . all of this results in a personal anatomical architecture that is unique. There are as many accents in a language as there are people who speak it. Everyone has an accent. It's like fingerprints, but on a grander scale.

In the beginning . . .

Why is there such extraordinary diversity? Why don't we all have the same accent? There's a reason for everything, evolutionary biologists say. And if we think of accents and identity in terms of evolution, a reason for accent variation does emerge.

Let's think further about Ben's list of ways in which we express our identity, from burqas to beachwear. There are so many things we can do to show we belong in a particular group, from the clothes we wear to the national flags we wave at the Olympics. We can sport a badge that tells the rest of the world who we are. And we can do something that is different from all these things: we can speak with a particular accent.

What's the difference? We have to go out of our way to find clothes, flags, banners, and badges, spending both time

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and money. Accents, on the other hand, grow up with us from an early age, naturally and unconsciously. And they cost nothing at all.

In addition, clothes, flags, banners, and badges have some serious limitations as markers of identity. They can't be seen around corners, and they can't be seen in the dark. The human voice doesn't have these problems. It can be perceived both around corners and in the dark. It is the only all-inclusive means of expressing identity that we have.

Perceiving identities in the dark would have been a critical factor in the early development of the human race, when speech was emerging for the first time. Imagine you're in a cave, and you hear voices outside. Are they friends or enemies? You call out. A voice replies. If the voice has the same accent as yours, it's probably safe to go outside, as the speaker is a member of your tribe. If the voice has a different accent, you can still go outside, but you'd better take your club with you! That is one way of thinking about accents – as a linguistic dimension to the survival of the fittest.

Fast forward a hundred thousand years or so, and things haven't changed all that much. I remember a conversation I had with a streetwise young man some years ago who told me he knew not to round a corner into a street, or go into a club or pub, if he heard a particular accent being used there. Often that accent was ethnic in origin. Conversely, he could recognize 'friendly' accents at a distance, ethnic or otherwise. In a society where different groups don't get on, listening to accents can still be a matter of survival.

Before we're born

Our ability to distinguish voices is something deeply ingrained in human nature. It's actually there before we are born. From around thirty weeks after conception, the ears of the foetus are sufficiently well formed to enable it to hear what is going on. The tiny little bones inside our ears, which transmit sound to our brain, are already fully developed by the time we're born.

During some types of gynaecological examination, researchers have inserted a tiny microphone, called a hydrophone, into the uterus, enabling them to hear what the foetus can hear. And what the foetus hears is a great deal of background noise – the mother's heartbeat, the blood sloshing around the arteries, tummy and intestine rumbles, voices and loud noises from outside – and, above all, the mother's voice resonating through her tissues, bones, and fluids. The foetus is asleep a lot of the time, but when awake, its heart rate slows when the mother is speaking – the first sign of a calming response.

It can't hear everything perfectly, of course. The effect is a bit like listening to someone talking with cotton wool in our ears. The voice sounds distant and muffled. But there are certain things the foetus can hear very clearly. It can hear the intonation, or melody, of the mother's voice, and it can hear the loudness and rhythm of her speech – and that includes her accent. Sound and movement combine: when she laughs, the foetus can be seen to bounce around.

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Once the baby is born, researchers have performed experiments to demonstrate just how much the foetus has heard. They monitor the baby's heart rate, the constitution of its saliva, the way it turns its head, the length of time it looks in a certain direction, or the rate at which it sucks on a special kind of nipple. The idea is that if a baby recognizes something, or is especially interested in something, then its heart rate or saliva content will alter, or it will turn its head towards a stimulus, or it will look at a stimulus for longer, or it will suck faster.

This is the sort of thing they've found. Newborn babies, even just a day old, prefer their mother's voice to that of a stranger. They show more interest when hearing their native language as opposed to a foreign language. If the mother has told the foetus a particular story during her pregnancy, the baby shows a preference to that compared with an unfamiliar story. And the effect of music emerges too – an important finding for accents, as the character of an accent owes much to its melodic lilt.

One study played the same tune to a group of mothers every day throughout pregnancy; another group of mothers didn't hear the tune. When all the babies were born, the tune was played to them. The changes in heart rate, movement, and general alertness of the 'musical' babies showed clearly that they recognized the tune. To check that it wasn't just a general response to music, the researchers played the babies a different tune, but they didn't react to it. Nor did they react to it when they heard the same tune played backwards!

There seems to be something special about the music of

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the voice. From the moment the baby is born, the mother – and other caretakers too – start talking to the baby in an unusual way. We call it ‘baby talk’. One of its most noticeable features is the way the voice ascends and descends throughout its whole pitch range – almost like singing in speech. And the exaggerated tones stay throughout the first year of life. The mother’s voice is higher in pitch, and she speaks more slowly, when addressing her baby than when talking to others, and she’s emotionally much more expressive. The effects can be clearly heard when playing simple games, such as peep-bo (peek-a-boo) or round-and-round-the-garden.

Not surprisingly, then, the first features of the mother’s language that the baby learns to reproduce are its intonation and rhythm. If we record babies’ early vocalizations, at around a month or so of age, we can’t tell which language they’re learning. Nor can we tell from their cooing or babbling. But at around nine months the vocalizations start to sound ‘shaped’, and it’s possible to distinguish babies who are learning English from those learning French from those learning Chinese, and so on. This is long before they learn any words, so what is it that we notice? The rhythm and intonation of the languages. The English baby is vocalizing with a ‘tum-te-tum’ rhythm. The French baby with a ‘rat-a-tat-a-tat’ rhythm. The Chinese baby with a sing-song rhythm. Why intonation and rhythm? It’s no coincidence that these were the very features first perceived in the womb.

Melody, whether of speech or music, seems to be especially significant when talking about accents. Think of some of the accents you know, and try to describe them. It’s quite

difficult to talk about the distinctive vowels and consonants they use; it's much easier to say something about their musical properties. We describe their pitch, loudness, speed, and rhythm, just as we do with music. We say one accent is higher or slower than another, or it has a rising lilt. We talk about a drawling accent or a nasal twang. In *The Muppets*, everyone recognized the Swedish chef, not because of his words (which were unintelligible), but because of the Swedish melody of his speech.

Accents emerge in children's speech as soon as they're capable of producing words, which for most is around the end of the first year of life. The difference in vowel quality between an American *mommy* and a British *mummy* or *mama* can be heard very early on. And when words like *there* and *more* begin to be used, that final *-r* will be heard if it's in the parents' accent. By age two, a child has an accent that sounds like the one used by its parents and siblings. More than one accent, in the case of children growing up bilingually.

The process continues. Most parents have had the experience of listening to their three-year-old chattering away while playing with toys and suddenly hearing their own tones of voice when their little one gives a doll or a toy animal a sharp telling off. And when a child 'leaves home' for the first time, and starts to play with other children in a crèche or nursery, one of the first things parents notice is a new pronunciation brought home from the crèche. Indeed, the child need not even leave home to pick up a 'foreign' accent. If a family makes regular use of a home help with a different accent, the influence will be there.

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One of the most fascinating things about this whole process is that children 'know' who they're talking to, and adapt their pronunciation accordingly. This happens even in the first year of life, before real language starts. A child babbling away to its mother does so with a higher pitch range than when babbling away to its father. Children seem to instinctively sense the chief features of the voice they're interacting with, and copy them – or *accommodate* to them, as linguists say. It's an ability that will stay with them for the rest of their lives, and we'll see some of the consequences later in this book.