

It's what you say, not how you say it, that matters

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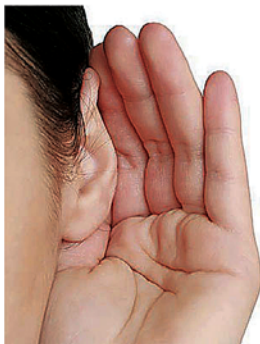


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I'm lucky enough to write a column every week about language and dialect in the nation's largest-selling regional daily morning newspaper. Clare Foges, David Cameron's former speech writer, is lucky enough to write a column in the nation's most famous newspaper, *The Times*.

Recently she also decided to write about language and dialect. Her main theme was that social mobility seems to be decreasing. (Other sources say there is actually plenty of mobility in the downward direction.) She also observed that young working-class people hit a glass ceiling at some point on the social hierarchy and do not manage to rise any further. But she doesn't blame our society for that. Instead she claims that it's because of the way these young people speak, saying: "those who speak sloppily will always be locked out of an invisible club."

But why "always"? Can't we try to get rid of this "locking out" process? Isn't Clare's callous acceptance of the inevitability of this discrimination rather like the Victorians saying "those who are female will never be able to go to university"? Or apartheid supporters saying "those who are Jewish will never be able to enter government"?



■ Should it matter in which accent we speak, as long as we are understandable?

But Clare has a solution: elocution classes. Instruct all young people to speak like toffs so that at an interview for a job at, say, *The Times* newspaper, they can pretend to be toffs.

We can imagine adverts offering this service. "Are you suffering from linguicism? Do bigoted people discriminate against you because of the irrational prejudice they have against working-class accents? Avoid this discrimination by attending elocution classes so you can sound more like them!"

But why stop there? How about: "Are you suffering from racism? Do bigoted people discriminate against you because of the irrational prejudice they have against non-white people? Avoid this



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discrimination by attending skin-lightening clinics so you can look more like them."

In this country we have made progress in eliminating sexist and racist prejudice but, as Clare Foges reveals in her ignorant usage of terms like "sloppy accents" and "bad grammar", and her irrational objections to glottal stops and pronunciations such as "fing = thing", many influential people still feel it is perfectly proper to demonstrate the crassest of linguistic prejudices in public.

Anybody can benefit from being taught how to speak clearly, audibly, articulately and coherently. But the linguistic truth is that one can be clear and articulate in any accent.