

Ridiculous theory on Aussie accents should be forgotten

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It is a frequent complaint of mine that people who are ignorant about language nevertheless feel free to pontificate about it in public places.

Some individuals who have never studied linguistics, and who know nothing about language – except how to speak one – seem entirely happy to pronounce on the subject in the media as if with authority.

We've recently had a ludicrous example of this phenomenon from Australia. A self-proclaimed expert in public speaking in Melbourne has gone public with one of the most preposterous linguistic "theories" of all time.

You really don't want to know the name of the gentleman who invented this outlandish story because hopefully you'll never hear of him again. As has been widely reported in the British national press, he has stated in all seriousness that the Australian English accent has an unusual origin. According to his laughable view, the Australian accent developed because the original English-speaking Australians were so drunk all the time that their speech became permanently slurred. This slurred way of speaking was then passed on to infants, and so down to subsequent generations.



■ Sydney harbour in Australia. Picture: PA

One Australian linguistics professor has described this view, with admirable restraint, as "absolute nonsense". Linguistic scientists are unanimously agreed that this whole idea is ridiculous. But this sort of sensational garbage gets reported in the international news media in a way that serious linguistic research generally does not.

For a start, there's nothing "slurred" about Australian English. And we do know what the origins of the Australian accent are. Several academics, including me, have carried out research and taught courses and written books on the origins of colonial varieties of English generally. Our investigations show that Australian English was initially the outcome of the

mixing of the different British Isles dialects of the first three generations of settlers. It has some features which are fairly obviously East Anglian in origin, for instance: we pronounce "roses" and "Rosa's" the same, and so do Aussies; Londoners do not – they pronounce "roses" as "ro-zizz".

Then, of course, after the mixture had sorted itself out, there have been several subsequent generations of different natural linguistic changes in Britain and in Australia which have taken the two varieties of English further apart.

The trouble is that the sober reporting of this type of careful research is not interesting to much of the international media. Happily, the EDP is different.