

# Cockney, Shaw and Major Barbara

Dafydd Gibbon

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# ***Shaw and Cockney***

## *Shaw and Cockney*

Shaw was Irish – and very concerned about the use of English, in particular that

- English spelling should be easy to learn
- English pronunciation should be intelligible to everyone

And he was (negatively) fascinated by Cockney!

So he was active politically in ‘spelling politics’:

- simplification of English spelling
  - the case of GHOTI = *fish*

and as a dramatist of ‘language politics’:

- standardising pronunciation by disparaging Cockney
  - the case of Eliza Dolittle (“Pygmalion” → “My Fair Lady”)

# *Eliza Dolittle - "Pygmalion" and "My Fair Lady"*

Pygmalion (1912): after the ancient Greek tale of a sculptor whose sculpture defied him.

Cf. also Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein"

Prof. Henry Higgins, phonetician, trains Eliza, Cockney flower girl, to speak upper class English, more successfully than he anticipated!

The models for Henry Higgins were phoneticians:

- Alexander Melville Bell  
(father of Alexander Graham Bell)
- Henry Sweet, teacher of Daniel Jones
- Daniel Jones



Alexander Melville Bell



Alexander Graham Bell



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Film production (1982) with Twiggy and Robert Powell:

Listen for the contrasts between RP and Cockney!

Twiggy (Leslie Lawson), supermodel of the 1960s, later character actress.



# ***Cockney – the people***

# Cockney

## Etymology:

### Two main proposals:

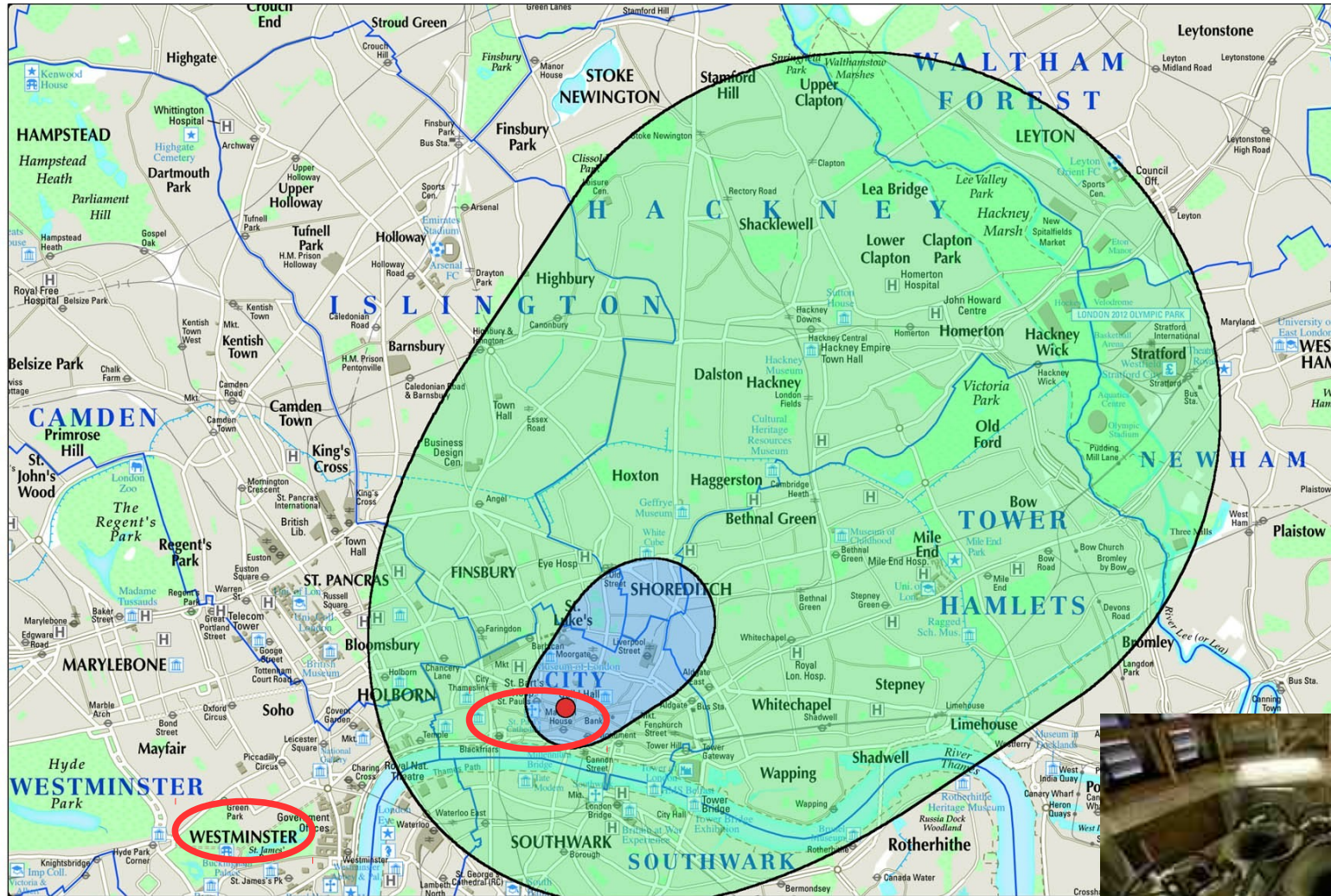
1. “Cockaigne”: an imaginary country of luxury
  - which people in the provinces associated with ‘soft’ Londoners
  - but later the meaning obtained much tougher connotations
2. “cocken eye”: Middle English – a cock’s egg (as opposed to a hen’s egg) – therefore strange, weird
  - cf. also “cockeyed” meaning strange, imperfect

## Popular definitions:

- A Cockney is a Londoner who was born within the sound of Bow Bells
- Cockney is the language spoken by a Cockney



# Bow Bells – the Church of St. Mary le Bow



Bow Bells Areas of Earshot

© 24 Acoustics Ltd/Collins Bartholomew Ltd  
Map taken from *The Times Atlas of London*, 2012

↗ Wind Direction

1851  
2012

● St Mary-le-Bow Church



Bow Bells rung by Cambridge ringers

Bow Bells from the belfry



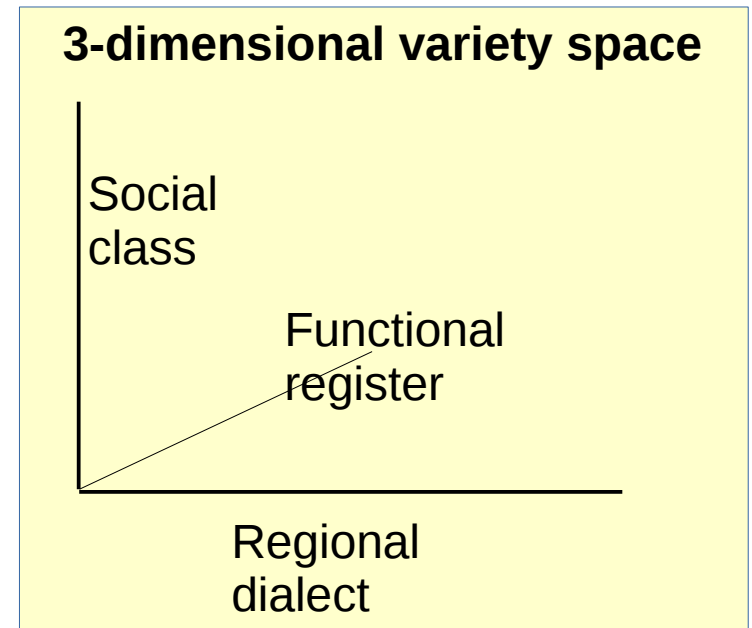
# Cockney

## Is this definition valid?

“The language of a Londoner born within earshot of Bow Bells”

## Critique:

- this region is not well defined: it even depends on the weather 😊
- the regional definition ignores sociolinguistic factors:
  - working class, e.g.
    - dockers
    - builders
    - road-workers
    - market stallkeepers
  - “tough” image



# ***Cockney – the language***

# Cockney pronunciation

## Humour in the media (source: YouTube)

Favourite Cockney 'golden oldies': Bernard Cribbins

“Right said Fred” (1962)  
workman stereotype



“Hole in the Ground” (1962)  
workman & boss  
social class stereotypes



“Steptoe and Son: Divided  
we Stand” (TV series, 1972)  
workman stereotypes  
father & son stereotype



Cf. also “Eastenders”

# *Cockney pronunciation: conspicuous features*

- **Consonants:**

- non-rhotic: car, butter
- voiceless plosive affrication: cup o' tea (cf. Swiss German!)
- t-glottalisation: butter, bit
- th-fronting: thin, bother
- h-dropping: home
- yod-affrication: tune
- l-vocalisation: milk, little

- **Diphthongs:**

- beet, bait, bite
- about
- bad, bed
- bought

# Cockney vocabulary

Humorous:

rhyming slang

List from

Wiktionary

Adam and Eve — believe  
apples and pears — stairs  
aris (short for Aristotle) — bottle, "bottle and glass" - arse  
Barclays Bank, J. Arthur Rank, Jodrell Bank,  
Tommy Tank — wank  
Barnet Fair — hair  
Barney Rubble — trouble  
bees and honey — money  
**berk** short for Berkeley Hunt — cunt  
(metaphorical - referring to person, not genitalia)  
bird lime — time (in prison)  
boat race - face  
boracic lint — skint  
bottle and glass — arse  
Brahms and Liszt — pissed (drunk)  
bristol (usually plural; short for Bristol City football team)  
— titty (breast)  
bubble, bubble and squeak - Greek  
bubble, short for bubble bath – "laugh", "You're having a bubble"  
**butcher's** hook — a look, "Let's have a butcher's!"  
Cadbury's Flake - Mistake  
Chalk Farm — Arm, "Get your chinks off the table!"  
Cheese and kisses - Missus (wife or girlfriend)  
**china** plate — mate (friend, "Me ol' china!")  
**cobbler's** awls — balls (testicles), "A load of cobblers!"  
currant bun — sun (also The Sun, a British newspaper)  
custard and jelly — telly (television)  
**daisy roots** – boots

# Cockney vocabulary

Humorous:

rhyming slang

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dog and bone — phone

dog's meat — feet [from early 20th c.]

dustbin lid — kid

Farmer Giles — piles (haemorrhoids)

frog and toad — road

Gareth Hunt — cunt

(most common at the height of the actor's fame)

**ginger** beer, King Lear, Brighton Pier — queer (homosexual)

Gypsy's kiss — piss

half-inch — pinch (to steal)

Hank Marvin - starving

irish jig — wig

iron hoof — poof (a homosexual)

jam-jar — car

James Blunt — c\*\*t (derogatory)

Jimmy Riddle — piddle

**Khyber** Pass — arse, “up the Khyber”

loop the loop — soup

mincers (short for mince pies) — eyes

Mutt and Jeff — deaf

Nelly Duff — puff (= life; as in “Not on your nelly!”)

north and south — mouth

oliver twist - "pissed" (drunk)

Peckham Rye — "tie" (necktie)

pen and ink — stink (noun)

**plates** of meat — feet

porker, porky short for pork pie — lie (untruth)

rabbit (short for rabbit and pork) — talk



# Cockney vocabulary

Humorous:

rhyming slang

List from

Wiktionary

raspberry ripple — cripple

**raspberry** tart — fart, fart sound made with lips

Rosy Lee — tea (drink)

Ruby Murray — curry

salmon and trout — snout (tobacco)

sausage and mash — "cash"

Scooby (short for Scooby Doo) — clue

"I haven't got a Scooby"

septic tank — Yank

sherbert (short for sherbert dab) — cab (taxi)

skin and blister — sister

struggle and grunt - "cunt"

syrup of figs — wig (sic) (always just "syrup")

tables and chairs — stairs

taters (short for potatoes in the mould) — cold (adjective)

tea leaf — thief

tid (short for tiddlywink — Chink (Chinese person)

Tilbury docks — "socks"

titfer (short for tit for tat) — hat

tom tit — shit

Town halls - Balls (testicles)

Tristram Hunt — cunt (metaphorical - referring to person, not genitalia)

**trouble** and strife — wife

two and eight — state (of upset)

**whistle** and flute — suit (of clothes, smart as a new whistle)

## *Cockney vocabulary other sources*

Folk etymology, e.g. Covent Garden market speak:

sparrow grass – asparagus

crayfish – écrevisse

Yiddish:

gelt – money (cf. German ‘Geld’)

kike – Jew (Hebrew ‘circle’)

kosher – correct, lawful (Hebrew ‘proper, lawful’), vs. treif

nosh – food (cf. German ‘naschen’)

Abbreviation:

Chink, chinky nosh

# ***Cockney and Major Barbara***

## *Major Barbara and Cockney*

An example: Act II, Bill Walker (34:14 – 34:37)

*BILL. I know you. You're the one that took away my girl. You're the one that set er agen me. Well, I'm goin to av er out.*

*Not that I care a curse for her or you: see? But I'll let er know; and I'll let you know. I'm goin to give er a doin that'll teach er to cut away from me. Now in with you and tell er to come out afore I come in and kick er out. Tell er Bill Walker wants er. She'll know what that means; and if she keeps me waitin it'll be worse.*

*You stop to jaw back at me; and I'll start on you: d'ye hear? There's your way. In you go. [He takes her by the arm and slings her towards the door of the shelter. She falls on her hand and knee. Rummy helps her up again].*

# *And a finally – the Cockney Music Hall humour tradition*

Video: 1961, live: Lonnie Donegan, “King of Skiffle”  
with: “My Old Man’s a Dustman”



Lew Dite and his skiffle board (washboard)