Rob Drummond has lost the ability to simply listen. A professor of socio-linguistics at Manchester Metropolitan University, he hears far more than what’s being said when someone opens their mouth. “I have this particular facial expression that indicates when I’ve stopped listening to the content of what someone’s saying, and am thinking about their accent,” he says. “Apparently, I start to quietly recreate the interesting sounds under my breath.”

Drummond’s fascination with the way we talk began while teaching English as a foreign language in Manchester in the early 2000s – some of his international students would take on a noticeable Manchester accent; others wouldn’t. “It led me to my PhD: why some Polish people in Manchester acquired a Mancunian accent, and some did not. The results were fascinating: people who intended to settle acquired a local accent quicker than those here temporarily. I started to see accents as a way of associating, or distancing, yourself from a certain group. At times, it’s deep-rooted, trained into your brain. At other times, it can be a performance. Sometimes both.”

He soon turned his focus to accent prejudice, a cornerstone of his new book *You’re All Talk*. “I’m a middle-aged, middle-class white man from Hertfordshire; the way I speak has never been an issue for me, unlike for plenty of people. Each of my projects since has explored stereotypes associated with accents.”

Given the UK’s small size, there’s huge accent variation. “So many different groups travelled to these islands historically - first, native Celtic groups, then Germanic and Anglo-Saxon arrivals, Roman, Vikings and Normans.” From all these sources, Old
Sofia Ilyas, 42

London, music executive

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negative reactions to not sounding British-born. Over a decade later, my Andalusian twang has lessened. At work, I’ve picked up

because of the way I spoke. At a job centre, a member of staff asked me where I wanted to work. I said hotels. She laughed and

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Carlos Marfil, 34

Liverpool, creative producer

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Sofia Ilyas, 42

London, music executive
My family is Pakistani, but I was born in Cardiff. The mishmash of Welsh, South Asian and Sheffield sounds (my mother’s side of the family moved down for jobs at the steelworks) left my accent confused. I then got a place at a private school for my A-levels, which changed my accent drastically. I sounded posher and suddenly felt more confident. I noticed that I was being treated differently by strangers. People would trust me more; they’d be more respectful. As someone with no degree, it’s served me ever since. This has been especially true in a work context – it gives me authority when I’ve sat on boards or when I’m speaking to a CEO. I’m often perceived with less ethnicity, and it’s assumed I come from wealth. My voice has been a useful tool in the corporate world – I use it to my advantage. It does sadden me that losing elements of my ethnicity has helped in my career. Still, I’m making the most of it while that’s how things work.

David Lloyds, 65
Southampton, retired

I was born and raised in the US, next to the Canadian border. My father and all my grandparents were English, so my American accent has always had a hint of British and Canadian in it. While staying in France, I met my English wife, and we moved to Southampton in 1997. Despite living here for more than 26 years, people are still never quite sure where I’m from. They’ll often guess: Canada? America? Ireland? I know they are only being curious, but I’ve grown tired of everyone asking where I’m from: the gas man, the shop assistant, the religious zealot on the doorstep – the list is endless. I feel English and so un-American that I renounced my US citizenship. Really, I wish I could fully convert my accent to just “English” English. I’ve never been to linguistics coaching, but my wife and friends now know to point out when I say something American-sounding so I can weed it out.

Bethany Easton, 43
Surbiton, producer

I sound every bit like the Surbiton-dwelling wife of a privately educated barrister that I now am, but I’ve had this clipped RP accent my whole life, including while growing up in a foster home in rural East Anglia. My siblings have really broad East Anglian accents, but never me. At school, I frequently had the shit kicked out of me for “being so posh”, despite the fact I wasn’t. I always thought I spoke like this because, aged six, I’d decided I wanted to be a BBC continuity announcer and so developed the requisite speaking voice. Then recently, I was diagnosed with autism: one of its features, apparently, is speaking differently from your peers, copying someone from television. Could that have been a part of it, too? Today, I have a strange relationship with my “posh” accent, simultaneously wanting to seem middle-class, but also very keen to make people understand where I’ve come from; how far I’ve come from the chaotic house of messed-up kids. I now have a second job as a voiceover artist, and every time I get paid for my voice, I congratulate myself on one in the eye for those kids who beat me up.

Amanda Thomas-Johnson, 37
Ithaca, New York, PhD student

I moved to the US in August 2021 to start my PhD in literature at Cornell. It’s well known that British accents can attract attention in America, but being Black, I wasn’t sure how it would play out. I grew up in Hackney and as a kid I went to the US often to see family. Back then, when I opened my mouth here, people would look at me as if I was an alien species. Blackness was represented globally as Caribbean, African and US; Black British culture didn’t have its global footprint. Black British music has taken off here now. There’s Top Boy, too. To those who consume this, I’m no longer such an oddity. Still, others (mostly upper-middle-class white people) hear me speak now and still won’t see me as “properly English” – they ask where I’m really from. They don’t know how to handle a Black, well-spoken man with a British accent. But in a society that dictates that Black people are inferior, English accents have a cultural cachet. I’m racialised the same way, but my accent now gets me a class upgrade that Black Americans can’t access. A leg-up in a highly hierarchical society. This makes me uneasy: why should my accent make me “better” than an African American?

Belinda Memmott, 64
Swindon, nurse

Growing up in Romford, I never thought much about the way I spoke. I had a proper Essex accent – dropped aitches, the lot; think Birds of a Feather on steroids – but so did all my friends. It was normal to me. Certainly, I was never treated differently because of it. It was only when I moved to Reading to train as a midwife that I realised I had an accent. Things went downhill rapidly. An ex-boyfriend told me that I “would never amount to anything” with an accent like mine. When I asked the father of a baby I had just delivered what he was going to call his child, he said: “Anything as long as she doesn’t grow up sounding like you.” I was so shocked, I didn’t even answer back. Essex accents, I realised, were associated with being thick. It made me incredibly self-conscious, so I tried to actively reign my accent in. As I’ve grown older, I’ve stopped caring. I’ve grown to love my voice, and am very proud it seems to annoy so many people.

Julie Baker, 62
East Sussex, tour guide

In 1977, aged 16, I moved from the Caribbean to England to complete my education. Until then, I’d lived in Trinidad. I’m white and my parents spoke in RP, but I had a strong Trini accent. People in the UK were confused by what they associated as a Black accent coming out of my white mouth, but speaking Trini was all I knew. It
Julie Baker: ‘I asked myself: do I have a right to speak in my native accent?’
Photograph: Julie Baker

Neha Kagal: ‘I've had people make fun of my accent.’
Photograph: Neha Kagal

Anton Roberts: ‘When back home, I feel less authentic.’
Photograph: Anton Roberts

was so much part of my identity; I didn't know how to express myself without it. Some people here were politely curious. Others, less so. At my posh school, pupils threw banana skins at me and made monkey noises. It was very shocking. Cultural appropriation wasn’t such a thing in the 80s, but I started to ask myself: do I even have a right to speak in my native accent? Might people think I am mocking? I started to question the validity of my voice. Over time, I dropped my Trini accent. If people responded badly to how I said a certain word, I'd train myself to say it differently. But whenever I go back home to Trinidad, I automatically revert to it. It's in that voice I feel most comfortable.

Kate Macdonald, 59

Somerset, publishing

I was born in England, and moved with my family to Aberdeen aged five. I grew up speaking in a strong Scottish accent at school, slightly tempered at home. My English cousins teased me for having a Scottish accent; my Scottish school friends ridiculed me for sounding too English. I left Aberdeen aged 21 for a job in London, and found that not being understood in shops there was desperately humiliating. Now I live in Somerset, the West Country part of my accent that I inherited from my mother tries to assert dominance. But when I speak in public – as I discovered when I began working as a university lecturer – my accent is firmly Scottish. Giving talks is a performance, and the Scottish cadences just delight in coming out when I have an audience. It’s how I talk when I’m most at ease.

Neha Kagal, 37
London, international development

I love my Indian accent and am proud of it. I was born in India and moved to London in 2012. I soon realised there is a hierarchy of accents in the UK, with accents of the Majority World [Asian, African, Latin American, Middle East] usually falling somewhere towards the bottom. But I am not going to put on a fake British accent in order to be more palatable, relatable or “British”. I have a right to be me. In the last decade, I’ve had people make fun of my accent, sometimes in spaces I would least expect it: close non-Indian family, progressive social justice spaces, even from some second-generation South Asians born and raised here. This is hurtful. It “others” you, tells you that you don’t belong, that you're “less than”, that you aren’t “there yet”, you can never be “one of us”. But I am not interested in living up to ridiculous standards of white supremacy. My goal is not to “assimilate”, it is to flourish and thrive. And I don't need a British accent to do that.

Anton Roberts, 36
Manchester, sociologist

I’m not sure what my accent is today. I was raised in North Wales and had its distinct accent. I moved to Manchester for university and suddenly felt very aware of how I spoke. I stuck out and perceived everyone else to be posher and more academic than me, because of their accents. There was casual mockery and certainly internalised insecurity, too. It was heavily interwoven with my class and notions of being taken seriously. I felt my ideas would be viewed differently through my Welsh pronunciation. I became so self-conscious that I intentionally dropped my accent to assimilate. In adulthood, I feel embarrassed that I can’t even pretend to sound Welsh any more. When back home, I feel less authentic, less Welsh even. Like I’m being fake. Around a strong Welsh speaker, I feel like a poor imitation. Apparently, when I’m extremely emotional, my accent does switch back. It's still inside me, at least. That's something.

You're All Talk by Rob Drummond (Scribe £16.99) is available for £14.95 at guardianbookshop.com