

PART II: SPEAKING THE SPEECH

“Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue...”

-- Hamlet, Act III, Scene 2.

As was noted earlier, there are no extant recordings of Elizabethan Englishmen and women speaking. The reconstructions of scholars are derived partly from careful attention to the spelling, rhyme and meter of period writing, and partly from dialects considered to have preserved elements of the old speech. Combining these factors with a modern knowledge of linguistics can lead to a reasonable approximation of the language as it was *probably* spoken.

Here’s something to think about: the island of England, as a single geographic entity (including Scotland, but excluding Ireland, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man, and the Isle of Wight), *before* the Norman invasion of 1066 had no less than *four* major native tongues: Anglo-Saxon, Scots Gaelic, Welsh, and Cornish. With so little travel, and no mass media to homogenize the language, the regional accents varied dramatically, sometimes even from village to village. In fact, when the great fairs were set up, a special court would be instituted for adjudicating disputes at the fair -- which would include men chosen to act as interpreters, translating between the dialects of the neighboring villages and towns!

And an accent isn’t an easy thing to shed: just ask someone who came to America as an adult, from Europe, Russia, or China. Even when the consonants are the same -- and there was no guarantee of that -- people tend to shape their vowels the same way they learned as a child. For example, Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the greatest men at Elizabeth’s court, kept a thick Devonshire accent until his death.

Vowels are probably the single greatest influence on what people will perceive as “your accent.” If you shape your vowels carefully (and it’s fine to speak slowly, if you must), most people’s ears will catch the “odd” vowels, and ignore the accustomed consonants.

While actors portraying townsfolk in a play or a Renaissance Faire might reasonably be expected to show the same local accent, it’s a fair certainty that someone from another region would retain his or her native accent to a large degree. By keeping this in mind, the performer need not be distressed if he or she fails to remember all the following guidelines. Even a few of them will provide ambience for the audience. As more are added, authenticity will increase while intelligibility (to the modern American ear) will decrease.

Slowly peruse the Vocabularies section in Part III of this book. Choose your words and phrases for practice, and make a list. Speak them slowly and carefully, looking at the guidelines below to see which ones apply. Once you feel comfortable with that, pick up the speed to a natural pace. Try using it around the house, or practice dialect among your friends (if they’re doing it too). Then switch words around, substitute other words to change the meaning, and vary the pace and pitch for expression.