

Terms of Endearment

We have all experienced it – we arrive in a foreign country armed with a phrasebook and a few well practiced expressions hoping to explore the country and enjoy a little, basic communication with the natives only to find ourselves hopelessly lost when confronted with dialect words we have never encountered. Making friends with the locals is one of the joys of travelling but in the UK, with its plethora of accents and regional vernacular words even initial greetings can be confusing. Let's have a look then at some of myriad ways that people around the UK refer to their nearest and dearest.

Beginning in Scotland, male friends in Glasgow often greet each other as 'big man' or 'wee man' (*wee* means small) depending on the height, or sometimes weight, of the individual addressed.' Hen' is sometimes used for women. Over in Edinburgh a friend is a 'gadgie'.

In Newcastle (home of the Geordies) 'bonny lad' and 'kidder' are warm expressions of affection (*bonny* means pretty) while 'pet' is used with women. In Liverpool where an influx of immigrants from Ireland produced a distinctive local dialect called 'Scouse' and one of the strongest accents in the UK, 'lad' is shortened to 'la'.

Make friends in Northern Ireland and you may well find yourself addressed as 'sham' another word meaning young boy and derived from Ireland's travelling community. In Wales 'boyo' and 'butt' are commonly used between males.

In Birmingham the local dialect and people are referred to as 'Brummies' and the word 'mucker' denotes a friend here. The broad Birmingham accent is notorious as perhaps the least popular in the UK. Indeed, a recent study revealed many British people associate it with stupidity, ironic given that Shakespeare way well have spoken with a strong Midlands accent. By way of contrast The Irish accent is held to be the most attractive of all and people from that part of the UK are in great demand to work in telephone sales.

In London the distinctive local dialect of the East end 'cockney' has largely merged with those of the counties surrounding London to produce a new hybrid known as 'Estuary English'. Londoners can be very familiar and such affectionate terms as 'darling' 'love' and 'mate' are commonly used with casual acquaintances or even by shop assistants with customers.

Interestingly, although speakers with strong local accents were once looked down on in British society the reverse now seems to be true. Whereas the BBC once maintained a policy of employing only announcers capable of speaking a standard form of English known as RP (received pronunciation), now regional accents are commonplace on the airwaves and dramas from the four corners of Britain, many featuring quite challenging accents and dialects, are amongst the most popular on television. The whole topic of accents and dialects is explored on the BBC's website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/>)

So what was once a stigma has become a status symbol and given rise to such curious phenomena as the 'Mockney' (imitation cockney), a celebrity who attempts to boost their popularity by adopting the accent and dialect of the east end of London. Tony Blair, Damon Albarn and Jamie Oliver have all been accused of being 'Mocknies'.