

Have you heard Gordon Brown lately? He is sounding less and less Scottish by the minute. That is not to say he's starting to sound anything else, just a bit less Scottish. In the words of The Proclaimers, he seems to be "flattening his a's & losing his r's".

He always claimed to reject the Tony Blair style of spin, where careful presentation was of the utmost. Told us he valued policy more than presentation. But now it seems as though he is starting to think that it might be better if he wasn't quite so Scottish. It's a hard line that he's walking. On the one hand, there is definitely some anti-Scottish rhetoric in the southern press particularly those less sympathetic to Labour's cause. On the other hand, Labour retains a power base in Scotland that he needs to keep sweet. The result is that he needs to remain Scottish without it being too in yer face. More Sean Connery than Rab C. Nesbitt.

This dilemma has been played out for ever. It started with the BBC in its early days seeking Received Pronunciation from all. Now it's the reassuring accent that call centres seek; the Geordie or Scots voice that people trust but has to be moderated so that it suggests an origin without being too strong. Part of the induction training that staff are given is designed to iron out anything too distinctive. It is dressed up as speaking clearly, but is as much about making us all sound the same.

Not that the call centres can do anything about the accents of their customers. I used to work in an English call centre, booking furniture deliveries, and soon found myself being given all the calls north of the border. This suited the company as some staff found it difficult to understand customer's directions and it suited me as I enjoyed the craic better.

An accent defines much more than a geographical region; it can also associate people with a social class or an ethnic group. My mum swore she could tell any

Glaswegian's religion from how they spoke, a skill I fear I may have inherited. Tied to an accent is language, which can include or exclude people from a group. Any parent trying to 'improve' their child will pick up on their use of particular words as well as on how they are spoken.

Authentic films such as *Trainspotting* justifies the use of swear words, as it portrays people who use this sort of language in their daily life. A favourite film of mine, *Sweet Sixteen* is aimed at an audience that the film censors deem to young to be exposed to such strong language (and drugs, and violence). The controversy was around one particular word, which normally called for an 18 certificate, but – it was argued - is more commonly used here than in London where the censors live. The censors won the argument, although Inverclyde Council used their right to overrule this allowing the youth of Greenock to hear the kind of language I am sure they hear every day.

When I read autobiographies, or one of those novels that purport to give an account of someone's life, I find myself hearing the story in the appropriate accent. I defy you to read something you know is written by Graham Norton or by Jimmy Nail without hearing their voice in your head. Someone I know spends her winter evenings looking through internet dating sites. She has a thing for men from the Emerald Isle and, because she reads their descriptions in an Irish accent, swears they are infinitely more attractive than their Scottish counterparts.

Whenever I speak to someone from Belfast, I find myself starting to mimic their accent. I'm sure it must seem incredibly rude to them, although I have read that it's just me displaying empathy with the person I am talking to. Maybe I do it because it's the only accent I feel comfortable copying. My attempts at any other

accent usually degenerate into something from the opposite side of the world. I do hope Gordon Brown doesn't fall into the same trap.