

Performance » Spoken Word

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# High Society's Twisted Tongue

By Jami Stall

Christmas used to be a much classier affair.

Or so it seemed in all the holiday musicals and melodramas from the 1930s and '40s. Impeccably dressed men and women with their impeccably dressed children all spoke with that perfectly clipped English elocution of aristocrats.

Their soft vowel sounds were silkier. Not a single 't' was pronounced as 'd,' and 'g's weren't lazily dropped from "ing"-ending words. *Sup?* and *dat* didn't exist.

They spoke great grammar with ease. From Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant to Bing Crosby and Ingrid Bergman, stars of the silver screen used nothing but proper pronunciation. And it wasn't just with the British expats. Everyone sounded well-heeled and a wee-bit British.

So what was up with that?



King and Queen of the quasi-British accent, Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn get playful in *Holiday*, a 1938 romantic comedy.

According to Jonathan Strickland at Brain Stuff, back in the '30s and '40s that highfalutin way with words wasn't natural at all. He says that outside of finishing schools and theatrical classes, the only place people spoke like that

## About The Author



Jami Stall

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**Bio:**  
Jami Stall, editor of award-winning *Sky Blue Window*, loves discovering all the arts and cultural activities around Central Indiana. When she isn't writing or shooting pics, she's out and about meeting the people and enjoying the events featured on

SBW.

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### Wait Wait...Do Tell, Paula Poundstone

Comedian and panelist on NPR's *Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me!*, Paula Poundstone comes to Indy this Saturday. Here she shares with *SBW* the not-so-glamorous life she lives and loves.

by Jami Stall

### The Über Tuber

A photograph of a solo silhouetted potato brings in more than a million bucks abroad. So what's so special about this spud?

by Jami Stall

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### Wait Wait...Do Tell, Paula Poundstone

Comedian and panelist on NPR's *Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me!*, Paula Poundstone comes to Indy this Saturday. Here she shares with *SBW* the not-so-glamorous life she lives and loves.

by Jami Stall

### Hang On, There's Hope.

This Saturday Clowes Memorial Hall will bring *It Gets Better* to the stage for a powerful and entertaining message of hope and support to the LGBTQ community -- and especially to its youth and their loved ones.

by Chi Sherman

### Straight Talk With Nikki Giovanni

Poet, activist and educator, Nikki Giovanni chats with *Sky Blue Window* ahead of her visit to Indy this Saturday, as featured speaker for Indianapolis Public Library's Fall Fest 2015.

by Shelby Roby-Terry

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was in motion pictures.

Completely contrived, the Mid-Atlantic accent (as it's known) was a mash-up of standard American English and Britain's Received Pronunciation. Even for Cary Grant, who was born in Britain, the accent was an affectation.

To learn more about the linguistics of this snooty style of speech, check out Strickland's video *Why Do People in Old Movies Talk Weird* below.



And for additional tidbits on the topic, take a look at this piece in *The Atlantic* magazine from a while back.

To hear the Mid-Atlantic accent in action, indulge in some of the following fine flicks of this season:

**Holiday Inn (1942)**

**Christmas in Connecticut (1945)**

**Miracle on 34th Street (1947)**

**Remember the Night (1940)**

**The Bishop's Wife (1947)**

**The Man Who Came to Dinner (1942)**

**The Bells of St. Mary's (1945)**



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Bing Crosby serenades Marjorie Reynolds in 1942's *Holiday Inn*.

Tags: Spoken Word, Carey Grant, Joseph Cotten, Janet Leigh, Maureen O'Hara, Speech, Language, Jonathan Strickland, Brain Stuff, Transatlantic, Mid-Atlantic, Accent, Why Do People in Old Movies Talk Weird, The Atlantic, Holiday inn, Christmas in Connecticut, Remember the Nigh, The Bishop's Wife, The Man Who Came to Dinner, Video

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Translating language from one culture to another means understanding its context -- rendering the translation an original work itself.

by Jennifer Delgadillo

### You Say Potato ...

'Bilingual' Dan delves into a discussion on dialects and invites readers to share their favorites.

by Dan Carpenter

### WTF?

Has the F-word lost its ability to anger, offend or arouse? The F-bomb barrage on contemporary language and literature gives Dan reason to ponder its power.

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