

## Sounds Appealing

The following text is an adapted introduction to **Sounds Appealing – The Passionate Story of English Pronunciation** by David Crystal (2019)

In the 1980s, I found myself as the ‘voice of language’ on BBC Radio 4. It was a time when the range of presenters you would hear on the air in Britain had greatly increased, following the emergence of local radio stations all over the country, and with new voices came new usages and new accents. Many listeners, used to the traditional ‘voice of the BBC’, with its echoes of wartime authority and pride, were taken aback, and sent letters and postcards in great numbers, expressing 30-1 at what they perceived to be a falling of standards. The comments related to all aspects of spoken language, including vocabulary and grammar, but most were passionate about 30-2.

The BBC didn’t know what to do with the huge postbags that were coming in. There was a Unit that dealt with queries (such as how to pronounce the name of a foreign place or politician), but the range of issues being raised went well beyond its remit and the small team that staffed it couldn’t cope with the 30-3. So, as a known linguist who’d already done some broadcasting, the Unit sent them to me.

I went through a month’s worth, and organized the complaints into a ‘top twenty’ list. (In the hundreds of letters and cards that I read, nobody once wrote words of 30-4.)

What really struck me was the intemperate language used by the complainers. People didn’t just say they ‘disliked’ a particular accent. They used the most extreme words they could think of. They were ‘appalled’, ‘aghast’, ‘horrified’, ‘outraged’, ‘distressed’, ‘dumbfounded’ when they heard something they didn’t like. If one can be ‘appalled’ about such matters, what kind of language is there left to refer to serious issues?

