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Pronunciation and accent

These are two ways of describing how we speak. My attempt to differentiate them here is meant not as the drawing of a sharp or final distinction but just a matter of convenience. So somebody may speak in a way that strikes his hearers as markedly individual, but for all that everyone's *accent* is a general thing that depends roughly on a speaker's place of birth, upbringing, education and subsequent environment, whereas *pronunciation* is a question of how individual words are spoken. Therefore it may make sense to talk of an American accent or a Suffolk accent or a public-school accent, and even to think of one as 'better' or 'worse' than another overall, but one pronunciation of a given word will be considered 'correct' and another 'incorrect'. It has become respectable to say so only in the quite recent past. See RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION.

For practical purposes, an *accent* is chiefly a matter of how vowels and suchlike are said, an obvious example being the 'Northern' or 'North-country' U in words like *bug* and *bud*; *pronunciation* often concerns the stressing in a given word, so that the correct way to pronounce *formidable* is with the stress on the first syllable and to put it anywhere else is incorrect.

Pronunciation as it now is

It may be deplorable, or at least seem old-fashioned to some, to talk of correct and incorrect pronunciation, but surely most of those who refer to or otherwise read a treatise on our language are looking for guidance rather than mere description, not least in the present category. They want to be told not what their neighbours or the educated or the half-educated or the vulgar or scholars say or avoid, but what they themselves should and should not say, what is

correct and what incorrect. In 1926, Fowler found it sufficiently easy to instruct readers of *Modern English Usage* that:

> While we are entitled to display a certain fastidious precision in our saying of words that only the educated use, we deserve not praise but censure if we decline to accept the popular pronunciation of popular words . . . Pronounce as your neighbours do, not better. For words in general use, your neighbour is the general public.

That view could only have been advanced when the division between educated pronunciation and popular pronunciation was more rigid than it is today, and perhaps by somebody whose neighbours lived next door in a college quadrangle rather than in a housing estate. Further, the imagined spectacle of Fowler in his talk nimbly leaping across that division, and a moment later as nimbly back again, causes me some uneasiness. I am not quite saying that in the passage quoted his chief intention was to vindicate his usual approach to linguistic problems. He was certainly doing more there than justifying his inclination to run with the liberal hare and hunt with the conservative hounds, but he was doing that.

Today, too, Fowler might have had to recognise that the 'general public' often use words that in his time only the educated would have used, and more importantly that that 1990s general public no longer learn their pronunciation chiefly from the practice of their elders and contemporaries but from other sources. The most important of these other sources is broadcasting, in a wide sense of that term. I intend not only what reaches us by television and sound radio, though it is predominant, but also film, the stage and various analogues and derivatives.

Pronunciation as they broadcast it

Young broadcasting performers, prominent performers, regular performers exercise a powerful influence on how the rest of us speak, an influence more immediate than that of courtiers, ecclesiastics, academics or any other dominant group of the past. Modern broadcasters do not of course speak with one voice, but by listening to them it is an easy matter to form an image of how the pronunciation of our language may be changing, perhaps irreversibly.

When one of us today hears a recording or sound-track of speech from before the last war, it sounds old-fashioned in several ways that have nothing to do with reproduction systems. In particular, the pronunciation of several easily differentiated vowel-sounds seems not to be as it was. To particularise further, the pronunciation of what used to be the short A (as in *bat*), the short E (as in *bet*) and the long vowel or diphthong AR or AIR (as in *bare*) is changing to something different, as follows:

i) The sound of short A is now close to what used to be short U (as in *but*). A broadcaster now seems to talk about 'the impuct of blucks' attucks on other blucks' in parts of Africa.
ii) The sound of short E is now close to what used to be short A. A broadcaster now seems to talk about 'lass attantion in the Prass' paid to something-or-other.
iii) The sound of AIR is also not what it used to be, but the change is more difficult to pin down without recourse to phonetic symbols. Here goes anyway. If in pre-war times a speaker talked about *air* or *bare*, the diphthong used consisted of an E-sound blended into a U-sound or something close to it. If a modern broadcaster talks about *air* or *bare*, she (see next section) uses a pure or near-pure A-sound of longer duration than the vowel once generally heard in words like *bat*. Try saying *bat*

slowly without the final T and you may well produce a sound very like the trendy pronunciation of *bare*.

Anybody who finds parts of the foregoing abstruse can at once recognise what I mean by turning on the wireless, now often known under American influence as the radio. As I write (in 1994), as good an example as any is the speech of Classic FM, or Clussic Aff-Am in its own manner of speaking. Further pronunciation-trends to be found there and elsewhere include saying *-sheer* for *-shire* in names of counties (*Northamptonsheer* for old *-shuh*) and a colouring of an E-vowel in short U-sounds (*sebmarine*, *hennyseckle*). This latter sound was once current among would-be posh speakers from the north-east of England, but shows recent signs of settling down as part of the generic sub-standard RP to be heard among radio news-readers. Another shibboleth is provided by the pronunciation of *one* more or less as *wan* (rhyming with *don*) in Northern fashion. There are further examples of the influence of broadcasting and broadcasters.

Pronunciation: he-she

For an essentially modern broadcaster (see last section) I would prefer to read *she* chiefly because the new sounds were first heard in public from young women, especially actresses of the 1940s, who perhaps felt that the old sounds helped to create a vaguely superior, scolding, finicky effect out of place in the then new Britain. See *Language Made Plain*, by Anthony Burgess, who was among the first to notice the new sounds. To this pair of ears, the old sounds do indeed seem a bit finicky, etc., in comparison, but at least they never seem gushing or girlish.

Pronunciation in general

Spelling-pronunciation, the tendency to allow or encourage the way a word is spelt to influence the way it is spoken, must be as old as the first attempts to commit speech-sounds to paper. In English at least it is traceably very old. Evidence from such sources as diaries and personal letters suggests that, as always, men and women in the past spoke less carefully and correctly in ordinary domestic dealings than on formal occasions. Their practice in putting words on paper was, as might be expected, generally similar. So when we read, in a letter between friends, *Ile sen you an unnerd poun*, we can guess that this closely follows the sounds of actual informal talk, though we can be pretty sure too that the sounds of formal, best-behaviour discourse would be more closely represented by, *I'll send you a hundred pounds*.

Not very sure, however. If I may digress for a moment, the way we now say *hundred* might well be the result of a modern spelling-pronunciation, an opinion supported by such evidence as the words *blundered*, *thundered* and *wondered* offered as rhymes to *hundred* by the educated and fastidious Tennyson ('The Charge of the Light Brigade', 1854) and by the fact that older rustic speakers said something like *hunnerd* within living memory. Perhaps some still do. I will add here that the dropping of the final D in vocables like *sen* and *poun* is paralleled by the occurrence in pre-war blues lyrics of forms like *han* for *hand* and *mine* for *mind*.

Spelling-pronunciation (to resume) was greatly boosted by the educational reforms of the nineteenth century, which made it socially more difficult to speak like an illiterate person. So the traditional *weskit* was firmly pushed out by *waistcoat*, the monosyllabic *tords* yielded to the dissyllable *towards* (though not in America), *perhaps* replaced the juvenile *praps* and the likely adult version *per'aps*, and the H began to be sounded as never before in words like *hotel* and *humour*. I conjecture too that during this period words hard

to pronounce 'properly', like *secretary* and *recognise*, lost their old pronunciations of *seckatry* or *seckaterry* and *reckanise* except among the 'lazy', the 'vulgar' and the 'uneducated'. What about *deteriate?*

The post-1945 educational 'reforms' (inverted commas denoting sarcasm are hard to avoid in the present context) made people more anxious than ever before to show that they were literate, i.e. able to read. Spelling-pronunciation entered its heyday and what had perhaps been heard only now and then became general and normal.

In 1926 Fowler could cover the subject in less than a column. He recommended that 'no effort should be made to sound the T in the large classes of words ending in *-sten* . . . and *-stle* . . . , nor in *often*, *soften*, *ostler*, *nestling*, *waistcoat* [of COURSE], *postpone* [less expected]. But some good people,' he continued with a show of leniency, 'afraid they may be suspected of not knowing how to spell, say the t in self-defence.' He might have added *chestnut* and *Christmas* to his list.

Fowler also went on to give a handful of samples of the many words 'whose spelling and ordinary pronunciation do not correspond, but with which mistaken attempts are made to restore the supposed true sound'. His first two samples are *clothes* and *forehead*, and I admit that I should rather like to be able to say *close* but from fear of being misunderstood do not dare, and that I unconsciously said *forrid* until the sincere incomprehension of a lecture-class in the 1950s brought me round to *fawhed* and to hell with Longfellow's little girl. (But see below.) So it goes with linguistic change: the aim of language is to ensure that the speaker is understood, and all ideas of correctness or authenticity must be subordinate to it.

One's readiness to embrace the last belief may suffer some weakening when the question turns to another pronunciational phenomenon, what might be called the intrusive H. 'In *Hunt has hurt his head*,' says Fowler, 'it is nearly as bad

to sound the h of *has* and *his* as not to sound that of *Hunt* and *hurt* and *head*.' Seventy years after *M E U*, some observers might want to amend this to read, in part, 'far worse . . . than'. To pronounce those five words with no Hs at all is a mere piece of illiteracy or vulgarity, venial offences compared with the vices inherent in pronouncing all five Hs. The 5-H version may be judged slightly superior in point of intelligibility, but not by nearly enough to balance its appalling affectation and pedantry, indeed vulgarity of a less appealing sort than that of any zero-H version. And yet, all over the kingdom, real people, not just actors and actresses, are saying, '*H*is tie suits *h*im' and '*H*er dress fits *h*er' simply to show their hearers that they know an H when they see one. The old usage was that in ordinary talk little words like *has* and *his* and *her* and *he* had their Hs sounded only to mark emphasis: '*h*e's gone [but she's still here]' as against 'e's gone [without leaving an address]' – so went the rule, none the less a rule for going unmentioned, being taken for granted, and like many rules of language easier to understand than to explain.

'For a particular affectedly refined pronunciation,' writes Fowler, 'see GIRL.' It may be disappointing to some that, when they duly see GIRL, they find only a short note on how to and how not to pronounce that word, so that it 'rhymes with *curl*, *whirl* and *pearl*, with the first syllable of *early*, not of *fairly* . . .' Here I can wheel forward my Longfellow quatrain, which runs:

> There was a little girl and she had a little curl
> Right in the middle of her forehead,
> And when she was good she was very very good,
> but when she was bad she was horrid.

Nothing wrong with that, though unfortunately Fowler goes on, 'But a pronunciation gairl, not very easily distinguished from gal, is much affected by persons who aim

at pecular refinement,' etc. Experience shows the danger of assuming that Fowler was ever unaware of anything, and perhaps the date is wrong for his apparent unawareness that the *gal* pronunciation is American rather than British, as in *Somebody Stole My Gal* et passim. And in any case the pronunciation he means to censure is surely *gel*, not *gal*, as in the speech of many born later than Fowler (b. 1858), and he also seems unaware of evidence that *gurl* was once a spelling-pronunciation, as in Max Beerbohm's caption to his caricature of Kipling (1896). But this is another digression.

Even at his best and most prophetic, one of Fowler's generation could never have foreseen the extent to which spelling-pronunciation, through the medium of a then undeveloped technology, would come to dominate our speech-habits. Except when delivering a news bulletin or the like, a broadcaster is not speaking in public in any close sense, but such a person must nevertheless be aware that untold thousands of people are or may be listening and anyway has some sort of duty to be (i) clearly heard and (ii) understood by as many listeners as possible whatever their own speech-habits. Once upon a time RP took care of any stragglers, but the world has moved on since then. It is no wonder if the result is a more precisely articulated mode of utterance than ordinary talk, a clarity of enunciation that will involve giving every syllable something like the value it has on the page, in fact liable to pronounce words as they are spelt. And several sorts of pressures will make it hard not to follow that example in one's own speech.

One obvious place to look for examples is in the pronunciation of those proper names which traditionally were not spoken as spelt. Among those no longer pronounced traditionally are Blount (formerly *Blunt*), Bohun (*Boon*), Cirencester (*Sissiter*), Coke (*Cook*), Daventry (*Daintry*), Hepburn (*Hebbun*), Ker and Kerr (*Kar*), Marylebone (*Maribun*), Pontefract (*Pumfrit*), St John (*Sinjun*), Waldegrave (*Wargrave*) and

Woburn (*Woobun*). It is probably true that a righteously egalitarian, who-does-he-think-he-is (to call himself Chumley when he spells his name *Cholmondeley*) spirit is also at work here.

These days we are pestered by something far more various, widespread and noticeable. The change is in the direction of pronouncing unstressed syllables with their full value, especially though not exclusively in unfamiliar or new words – I write 'in the direction of' because this is a tendency not yet completed. For instance, when I was young there was a contraceptive thing called a *condom*, pronounced *cond'm*; now, the evidently same thing is a *con-dom*, with a fully rounded second syllable. A year or two earlier I had been fond of a sweetmeat called a *caramel*, pronounced like *camel* with a brief extra syllable in the middle; it's a *caramell* now. As a sterling moderniser of Fowler's original has noted, *fortune* and *picture*, which used to be pronounced *forchoon* and *pickcher*, are now said as they are spelt, and *regiment* and *medicine* are usually spoken as trisyllables. *My* and *your* used to be fully pronounced only when emphatic, as in 'Well, it's not *my* hat [, it must be yours].' Otherwise, it was *muh* or *m'* as in *m'lud*, *m'tutor*: 'I've left *m'hat* behind.' Now we get the full treatment every time.

Proper names cop it too. There was a boy at school called *Ballard*, pronounced like *ballad*, rhyming with *salad*, by one of the masters, an elderly chap born probably in the 1870s. The boy himself called it *Ballahd*, like the rest of us, and of course the eminent writer of today is universally known as J.G. *Ballahd*, and jolly good luck to him. Also in those early years of mine there was a composer called Edward *Elgar*, second syllable like that of *sugar*; for a long time now the man has been *Elgah*. Well, unless his name gets its full value every time we might not all understand that it was he who wrote the Introduction and Allegro for string quartet and string orchestra. Foreign or foreign-looking names suffer from being sort of Europeanised, so we

hear about the oratorio Judas *Maccabayus* and the overture *Layonora* no. 3, say.

The tendency to pedantically accurate pronunciation has been reinforced by the employment of broadcasters born outside the traditional RP area of south-eastern England. West-country speakers, like Irish and most Americans, were brought up to pronounce the R in words like *bard* and *bird*, north-country ones to give full value to words like *consider* and *perceive*. Such habits provide some of the hearable evidence of an inclination to speak in a way perceptibly different from oldsters and snobs. And anybody who feels that the old speech-habits are too firmly entrenched should take discomfort from my having heard, three or four times recently, one or other broadcaster pronounce the words *says* and *said* as *saize* and *sehd*, to rhyme with *stays* and *staid*. Most things are never meant, as Philip Larkin wrote, and we all know that a thing does not have to be meant by anyone in order to happen.

Fowler is a marvellous writer with among other gifts an inquisitive and accurate ear for speech-sounds, but in one regard he had it easier than his successors. The contents of a printed page will last at least as long as that page; a spoken enormity comes and goes in a flash without record. But perhaps I am alone in feeling we have among us a small and not very dangerous monster that is nevertheless hard to keep in check. I am less likely to be alone in thinking that educated people mispronounce words more than they used to.

On the whole, it seems that positive guidance or direction of broadcasters' speech is attempted in only a few cases, of which *-sheer* for *-shire* is presumably one. Others include the saying of 'one hundred' in full every time that quantity is mentioned, occasionally producing mini-nonsenses like 'a one hundred times over', and a more mysterious ruling that calls for an interval before penultimate or antepenultimate *and*. This quite often produces less trifling nonsenses like

'showers in midland [voice falls and a brief pause follows, as at the end of a sentence] And northern districts'. But these are easily detectable, and nothing more detailed or outrageous is to be heard, so for instance we are spared attempts to make six syllables of *extraordinary* or pronounce *England*, *English*, etc., according to the spelling.

I end this section with a brief polemic on the spread of the glottal stop. This is a kind of consonant or consonant-substitute that may take some explaining to the uninitiated. The linguistician Leonard Bloomfield defines it as a slight catch in the throat; a speaker of German uses it before every word that begins with a vowel, as before the second and third word in *Deutschland über alles*; in old-fashioned cockney and Glaswegian speech it comes in the middle of words like *letter* (*le'er*) and *button* (*bu'on*), generally doing duty for medial double T; it is a small puff of breath from the top of the windpipe. There.

I first heard the glottal stop in standard English speech in 1946, though it can be traced back to American broadcasting in the 1930s. The greater historical closeness to German of American speech compared with British is perhaps relevant here and helps to justify my mention of *Deutschland über alles*. The glottal stop would have recommended itself to some speakers as a handy way of escaping the temptation of an intrusive R in phrases like *law and order*. Whatever the exact reason or reasons, the new consonant-substitute soon spread all over the place among broadcasters and others. It was apt to pop up before any initial vowel anywhere, so that people started speaking not of the *IRA*, but of the *`I `R `A* with a glottal stop before each letter. I have even heard it used in the middle of a word, like *fore `arm*, and, once, Queen *Juli `ana* of the Netherlands. *`Our* Father, which *`art* in heaven . . . for *`ever* and *`ever*, *`amen*.

I object to this shopworn novelty in the first place as a German noise, while *lawr and order*, however unpleasant to

some ears, is a British noise. More reasonably, perhaps, unnecessary glottal stopping seems an example of headlong pedantry, especially when associated, as it so often is, with affectations like sounding all one's Hs regardless of emphasis. English managed without such trumpery for hundreds of years. May it go on doing so.