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SPOKEN ENGLISH (1)

IS there such a thing as "standard English" speech? I have heard it defined as "the way an educated Englishman speaks"; but that doesn't take us very far. Try listening to about 20 different educated Englishmen and you'll see why.

There is, first of all, the question whether it is a desirable thing for all English-speaking people to conform to a common standard in their style of speech. My own instinct leads me to resist standardisation of human behaviour in all possible contexts. I believe in "personalism" (which is not



"Certain BBC announcers have cultivated a tongue of their own."

quite the same thing as individualism, in regionalism, and in organic growth rather than mechanical order. With Kipling, I "thank God for the diversity of His creatures." If it is good (as I believe it is) that the people of Wales should develop certain characteristics that differentiate them from the people of Yorkshire, is dialect speech one of them? This seems to me to present a difficult field of enquiry, in which we can stumble about for a long time without discovering any self-evident truths.

I am prepared, however, to defend the proposition that there is something that can be recognised as "standard English" speech, and that it is desirable to encourage its use in all places that are in any sense common meeting-grounds of English-speaking people. (We shall have to make our norm a fairly flexible one if it is to be applicable also—as it should be—to the Americans; but even then I think we can still give it a meaning.) University teachers, radio speakers, lecturers, and the members of the "clergy" should, I maintain, all speak according to a common convention. I hope nobody will suggest that this convention can't be "defined scientifically." Of course it can't, any more than one can give an exact definition of good manners, or orthodox golfing style. The language on which the greater and more valuable part of English literature is based is a common language, existing with a recognisable convention. I think we can establish a similar convention in spoken English; and this without importing any element of "regimentation."

Perhaps the best way to begin is to give some indication of what "standard English" is not. In the course of doing so it may be necessary to remove a few misconceptions.

In England, many dialects are spoken. Some of these are regional dialects, with a deep background of tradition. People from Devon, Lancashire, London, and North Wales all speak differently, if they have not learnt to conform to some more general standard. But there are other dialects, with a social and occupational, not a regional, origin. There is the "Oxford bleat," for instance. The Army and the Navy have their own peculiar habits of speech. Certain BBC announcers have cultivated a tongue of their own, which is just as much a dialect as Cockney or A'strylian. There are all sorts of variations on these modes of speaking. Southern Englishmen in general, for example, seem to be incapable of using the letter r. They will pronounce "re-write" as "we-wite," and say "Bewabbas was a wobber." And when they come from the upper crust, and try to be crisp and clear-cut in their utterance (to distinguish themselves from the more slovenly lower orders), they will say "heah and theah" instead of "here and there," and "shaw" instead of "sure."

Some of the BBC announcers we heard during the war were extremely odd in their speech-habits. "Here is the news" often became "Hair is the n'aws." We heard what Mr. Chemblin had said about the Empah, and were told about an enemy petrol-dump being on fah. "Captain" was demoted to "keptinn," and "furious" became "fyurious." The long A diphthong was turned into a pure vowel—"to-day" becoming "todeh."

This abandonment of the long A diphthong is fairly prevalent among those who speak what we may call, in the modern sense, Wardour Street English. (I saw it described the other day as "like cutting thin slices of ham.") All such words as fame, name, tale, eight, are pronounced with a rather colourless vowel sound instead of a diphthong—as in "todeh." (Or, if it makes it any clearer, "todair" without the r on the end.) The long U diphthong, as in "few" and "beauty," also suffers, in this case by a distortion of the diphthong ee-oo into ee-aw. So "few" becomes "fyaw," and "beauty" something very close to "b'yawteh."

The point I wish to make is that none of the distortions to which I have referred has any claim to rate as standard English. Those I have mentioned are heard more often in England than in the Dominions. I believe their origin can be explained, and I shall try to do so later on. First let us lend our ears, enquiringly but without zest, to some of the mutilations of standard English that are heard in New Zealand.

Erosion in New Zealand

First of all there is the ordinary New Zealand mode of speech (if I may be permitted to give it a label). It is bad, but not as bad as A'strylian, with which it shares several characteristics. Professor Arnold Wall and others have dealt fairly fully with this dialect, so I shall not try to survey its full range of wrecked consonants and mangled and telescoped vowels. It substitutes "foine" for "fine"; "I sigh" for "I say"; "quick-lee" for "quickly"; "Chewsdee" for "Tuesday"; "interjooce" for "introduce"; "fulla" for "fellow"; "neow" for "now"; "soote" for "suit"; "Kin y' do ut?" for "Can you do it?"—and so on. Very often the speaker sounds as if he had

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a cleft palate, or at any rate a loose dental plate. I believe a good deal of the trouble is due to a failure to open the mouth properly; but the full diagnosis is much more complex than that (There are also—although this is outside my present scope—some simple mispronunciations that seem to be quite general; "bassic" for "basic," and "adult," "ally," and "finance" with the accent on the first syllable instead of the second.) The intonation in this speech is pinched and nasal, with the speech organs cramped and restricted. One of its most characteristic points is the catarrhal vowel. If you are not sure from a man's speech whether he is a New Zealander or an Englishman, ask him to pronounce the word "Britain." If he is an Englishman the "-tain" will be sounded clearly; if a New Zealander, the word will be pronounced "Bri'n," with a sort of nasal snort or click where I have put the asterisk.

I have often wondered how people who speak like this contrive to enjoy reading English poetry.

Mewseek, wen sof' voices doie,
Voibrites in the memoree;
Odus, wen sweet violets sickun.
Live within the sense 'ey quickun.

Is there some strange metabolism of the mind that transmutes the debased vowels, rhythms and emphases back into



"Some of the elocutionists have exploited Colonial-genteel in a way that calls for the use of a blunt instrument."

the original gold? Or are the echoes that vibrate in the memory purely leaden?

Reactionaries

Some New Zealanders have reacted sharply against the dialect I am now describing, and have devised one of their own, which bears the same sort of relationship to standard English speech as a "serviette" does to a table-napkin. One or two of the private girls' schools seem to encourage this way of speaking, which we may call Colonial-genteel. It borrows certain of its twists from some of the more precious and hole-in-corner dialects of fashionable England, but it has added a few more on its own account. The round O diphthong in "home" is pinched and drawled to make

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