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SPOKEN ENGLISH (2)

Accent and Environment

The second of a series of four articles, written for "The Listener" by A. R. D. FAIRBURN

THERE is undoubtedly a very close link between the social and economic status of people and their way of speaking. This applies in a number of ways. Let me try to illustrate some of them.

The French demographer Arsène Dumont, who died in 1902 after a life of obscurity, came to the conclusion, having investigated closely the structure of the society in which he lived, that the process he called "social capillarity" had much to do with the decline in the birth-rate in modern democracies. He remarked that fertility is high in countries that have a rigid caste system—where people are born, live, and die in a caste from which it is impossible to climb upwards.

"Dumont held that in a modern democracy, which is essentially a society with political equality but social and economic inequality, the more intelligent and alert members of the community tend to rise in the social scale as oil rises in the wick of a lamp, and that social capillarity is the expression of a 'toxic principle' which invariably appears in such a society. The toxic principle is the cult of individual self-seeking leading to the dissolution of social solidarity. Working through social capillarity it results in numerous phenomena, the most important of which are depopulation, increasing urbanisation, the breaking-up of family life, and the decay of patriotism." (I quote from G. F. McCleary's book *Population: To-day's Question*.)

Whatever effect the "social capillarity" associated with individualism may have on vital statistics, I am sure it has a close connection with the development of certain of our class-dialects.

Accent and Emphasis

The regional dialects of England were natural growths. An obvious reason for their divergence from one another was the inability of the common people to travel far. Their betters went to London or Bath for "the season," but there was a rigid dividing-line between the upper and lower classes. My knowledge of rural dialects is too inadequate for me to make any strong assertions. I imagine, however, that there must have been a merging of one dialect with another, from village to village; and, on top of that situation, some development of group consciousness that caused a certain hardening of the dialect-pattern. A Somerset man who lived near Wiltshire would in the natural way probably speak very much like his neighbour across the border. But he might, on becoming conscious of himself as a Somerset man, a member of a regional group, bend his speech towards some conventional Somerset style of speaking, which would in time become recognisable as a distinct dialect.

If not just that, something very like it must have happened, if we are to

account for the emergence of different rural dialects. The point I wish to stress however, is the element of assertiveness—the deliberate acceptance and emphasis of a dialect by a regional group, or by its members, as an act of allegiance to one another. The more clannish people are, the more they are aware of ties of blood and soil, the stronger will be their tendency to cling to a native dialect. I know Scots and Irishmen who have been in New Zealand

for several decades, and who still speak with an accent like a suit of check-cloth. Englishmen, who have left the tribal pattern of society many more centuries behind them, tend to be much more adaptable to new social habits.

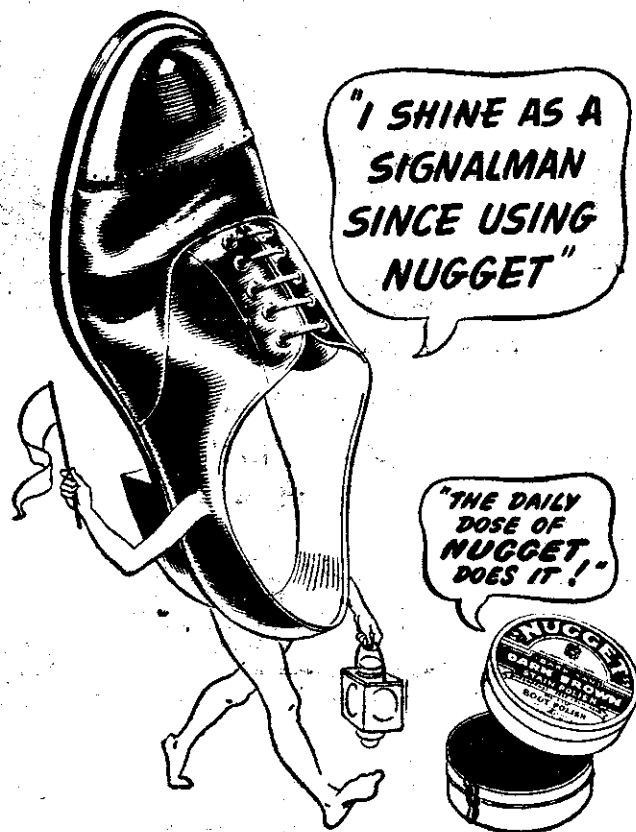
The sophisticated life of the Capital produces a fairly definite speech-convention among the "ruling class." In earlier centuries, with caste barriers still firm, there would be a strong tendency, but not a pressing need, for people to use speech-mannerisms to help them to maintain the "class front."

Class-Consciousness

But when those barriers began to crumble under the earthquake shocks of the Industrial Revolution, and "social capillarity" began to take effect, class-consciousness became more acute. There were people who belonged to the upper classes through family tradition; there were others, the "newly-rich," who climbed up through the social hierarchy and maintained their position by their money and the skin of their teeth. And there were the "lower orders," who for the most part accepted class-divisions as being decreed from On High, but began to breed a few revolutionaries to threaten the whole elaborate class-structure.

In this flux, I imagine that the use of class-dialects became more and more self-conscious. A family of low birth that made money and climbed into the company of the aristocracy would take care to ape the speech of its betters. It would probably go further, and become very high-falutin' indeed, just to leave no room for doubt. Some of the resentful aristocrats, needing no flamboyant badge of speech to assert their status, would perhaps go to the other extreme and wilfully drop their h's and g's, just to distinguish themselves from the climbers. The village girl who went into service in an upper-class establishment would try to bend the native speech of the village in an upward curve, as witness of her connection with the "nobs," thus providing raw material for the comic speech of stage-servants.

(continued on next page)



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