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Somewhere in this strange jungle full of apes and parrots and hyenas is to be found the shapely animal called standard English. The plea for its acceptance implies an attack, not so much on regional dialects, as on the extraordinary pattern of class-dialects that has come into being after a century and a-half of class disruption and "social capillarity." Standard English speech is one of the several pillars of a democratic community—and by that I mean a community in which democracy has come to be, not a destructive and anarchic force, but a norm of social living based on the notion of spiritual equality.

Language is the matrix of our consciousness in the Marxist sense, a different means by which we recognise ourselves as members of a community, and express ourselves as individuals. It is the link between man and mankind. In that sensitive medium we shall expect to find reflected, not only the subtle inter-relations between social groups and classes, but also the attitudes of individuals towards the society to which they belong.

The English working-class girl who takes a job as a parlourmaid, and begins to sprinkle aspirates liberally through her speech, is trying to conform to the social structure. She is not attempting to climb on to the same level as her employer. In dealing with other girls who work for employers who are slightly inferior socially to her own she will be extremely haughty, and import a much greater degree of snobbishness into the situation than that which exists at the top. By trying to speak in what she imagines to be a genteel manner she is making a ceremonial gesture of loyalty to the class-structure of which she is a part. Because she accepts her position willingly she has no oppressive feeling of social inferiority.

If, however, she becomes "class-conscious" in the Marxist sense, a different situation arises. She may sulkily assent to her condition of servitude—in which case she will probably drop any attempts to "improve" her mode of speaking. Or she may become aggressive about it, and deliberately roughen her speech in various ways, so that it becomes cruder than that of her parents.

In theorising about these matters there is, of course, the danger of becoming fanciful. But I think the pace at which people speak often has a significant bearing on their social position. Country people generally speak slowly. They belong to a pattern of life that is more leisurely than that of the hectic city. The American drawl probably has some connection with the easy, slow-moving life of the early colonists and settlers. People in hot countries tend to speak more slowly than those in cold climates. And people who have to get a great deal of work done in a very short time tend to speak quickly and jerkily. At the more highly-sophisticated levels of society there is often something close to a conscious intention in the way people regulate the pace at which they speak. The Services usually speak crisply, to convey the idea of efficiency. The Mayfair lady of ostentatious leisure draws, as if to show that she has plenty of time to say what she has to say—even if it is not worth saying. Her servants probably speak with that quick rattle of Cockney English one hears in East End pubs.

I am generalising, of course—throwing out suggestions rather than trying to lay down the law. In my next article I shall have something to say about New Zealand speech.

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