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## SPOKEN ENGLISH

# A Recognisable Norm

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

THE Maori language, if I am not mistaken, is practically devoid of diphthong sounds. The vowel sounds are kept apart from one another, when they occur together they are given separate and distinct expression. Maori is a musical language, but it lacks the subtlety and complexity of English. And this greater richness is due in no small measure to the numerous diphthong sounds that are used.

When some person, out of sheer gentility, turns the diphthong in the word "day" into a pure vowel ("deh"), or does the same thing to "fire" by pronouncing it "fah", he is helping to impoverish the English language. There are people who dispense altogether with the beautiful *i* diphthong in such words as "fine." Some of them make it "foine," others "fane." They, too, are wiping a very good colour off their palette, or their palate.

For similar reasons, the *a* in "far" should be given its full value, and should not be pinched in to approximate to the short *a* in "fat." On the other hand, it should not become "faw." "Aw," "ah" and "a" (short) are three good and distinct vowel sounds. They should not be substituted for one another, nor pushed in close together in the range of sound.

It would be tedious if I were to go through all the vowel sounds and their variations and indicate the distinctions. But in case any reader suffers from insomnia, and wants something to occupy his mind, let me offer a very simple and unorthodox system of vowel-phonetics that may help him to analyse the various diphthong sounds that are so often mispronounced.

### Common Errors

Why is it that they are so often misused? Partly because the vowels of which they are compounded are not produced properly in the throat. But mainly because the *wrong combinations* of vowel sounds are so often used in spoken diphthongs. Take the word "fine" by way of example. The *i* stands for a diphthong sound—the combination of the two vowels AH and EE. Say FAH-EEN quickly, running the two vowel sounds together, and you have FINE. If the two sounds are given efficient voice production, the pronunciation of the word will be according to correct standard English. If you go in the other direction, and make AW and EE your vowel sounds, you will get FOINE.

Take, again, the word BROWN. The correct diphthong is roughly AH-OO. But if you make the first part of it a short A, as in "cat," you will get the common New Zealand pronunciation. The really bad New Zealand pronunciation is a combination of three vowel sounds—BREE-A-OON (short A). Say it quickly, and you will see what I mean.

If you will go over the diphthong sounds in various words, breaking them up in this way, the importance of combining the right vowel sounds will soon become apparent; and you will be able to pick holes in the speech of almost anybody who talks to you. Some diphthongs are, of course, nearly fool-proof, and are almost impossible to mishandle. For instance, the *w* in WATER, which is really OO. Say OO-AW-TER quickly and you will be close to the mark. A similar example can be found in *y*. YOUNG and YELLOW can be broken up into EE-UNG and EE-ELLOW. (When *y* appears in the middle of a word it is nearly always the equivalent of *i* long or short.)

Standard English requires, then, first that there should be good voice-production—the full use of all the organs of speech; secondly, that the vowels should be fairly diverse, quite distinct, and evenly spaced from one another in the "sound spectrum"; and thirdly, that the diphthongs should consist of the right combinations of vowels. It requires many other things, of course—a good vocabulary, correct word-pronunciation, rhythm, proper emphasis, and so on. But those things open up other fields of enquiry.

Those who heard Leslie Banks speak the Prologue to *Henry V* will know what good English speech sounds like. (In ordinary speech there is not as a rule the need for such a powerfully expressive mode of utterance.) G. B. Shaw's speech is admirable; and among broadcasters Wickham Steed is outstanding. These men all speak differently, for they are different persons. But the speech of all three approximates to standard English, and stands up to phonetic tests.

The speech of most public men in New Zealand, on the other hand, is deplorable. The intonation is often raucous,

### New Zealand Tea Party: 1947

*SHRILL* voices fill the summer air with babel—  
Biscuits and cakes are piled upon the table,  
And the women loiter around it, plump and sleek,  
Exchanging village gossip of the week,  
Complaining of the shortage of sugar and fat—  
And throwing tit-bits to the well-fed cat.

*I SIT* and stare at the cream meringue on my plate  
Until its sickly contours disintegrate,  
And I see in its place  
A thing that resembles a human face,  
But fleshless, sexless, something less than human,  
A wizened infant? Or an old, old woman?  
Lips stretched, eyes sunken, the Thing stares back at me  
As I sit among our guests at afternoon tea—  
It is the face of Famine.

—Joan Hyde

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