

# The New Zealand Voice

LIKE all other voices, says ANDREW MORRISON, New Zealand voices are instruments whose inherent beauties are more or less universally ignored. Mr. Morrison, who is an examiner for Trinity College, spoke over the Main NZBS Stations on Sunday evening, November 7. His talk is reprinted below.

AS a schoolboy, I was taught that an essay Must Have Three Parts. This proposition was just as irrevocable as any that ever dealt with hypotenuse or conic section. Accordingly, not even the division of Gaul was more arbitrary than the fate that overtook my schoolboy essays. For my essays had Three Parts. Each had an Introduction—purposeless, perhaps, but an Introduction. Each had a Main Topic—tremendous but trite, as the Bellman would say. And each had a Conclusion—usually a frenzied attempt to rationalise the more obvious incongruities of the earlier phases.

The introduction was undoubtedly the testing ground. I owe most of my low cunning, my slyness, and my unoriginal sin to the Cult of the Introduction. Any schoolboy worth his salt put his heart into the introduction. There, he would tease the subject of the essay, apologise for the title, berate the intelligence of the person who had set such a stupid subject—and so on. With any luck, the dust he could kick up in the introduction would obscure the weaknesses of the main topic. A really clever child could undermine the confidence of his master and, by dint of literary blackmail, might even scrape together marks enough to satisfy the morbid ambition of his parents.

Sages tell us that we abandon the conventions of our childhood only to revert to them in our maturity. Something of the sort seems true. As you are by this time aware, I revert to the introduction with perhaps more commendable motives than have inspired other introductions that I have invented. I want to use this introduction to plead my honourable intentions—and to extend my terms of reference. My intentions first. I am tired of being a "Forthright Scot flaying New Zealand speech"—as I was recently described in a Dunedin newspaper. Nothing could be less characteristic. No dragon could be more reluctant. I hope that my interest in your problems—like my interest in the speaking of English—will never be mistaken for effrontery or worse. My terms of reference: a discussion on Voice, simply and solely, would be a highly technical affair and one that I would very soon hand over to my medical colleagues. But speech, which might be called "voice made manifest," is another and more interesting topic. I do not propose to confine myself to the "New Zealand Voice," but I offer no apology for my references to "New Zealand Speech."

Voice is, as my young examination candidates tell me, a vibrating column of air. This is, of course, a superb simplification of a very controversial topic. The more I listen to voices, the more I learn of the relevant anatomy, the more convinced I become that the thing we call "voice" is as complex as it is individual. But, nothing daunted,

my young friends go on to define speech as what happens when voice becomes tangled up in the organs of speech. (They put it a little differently, but I am sure that that is how most of them picture it.) The organs of speech, by the way, are the lips, tongue, teeth, hard and soft palates.

The children's definitions are useful to us, if only to indicate in the broadest terms the kind of difference that exists between voice and speech.

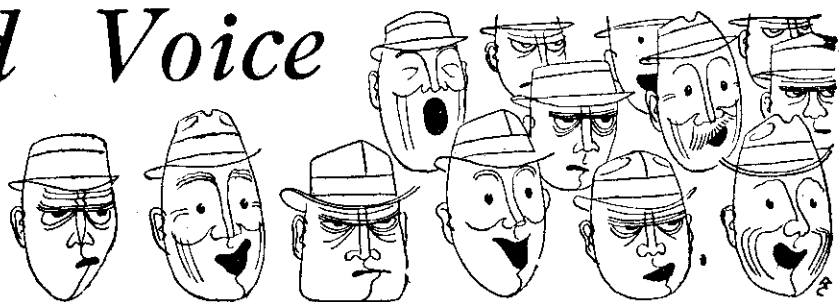
## Air in Vacuo

Strictly speaking, there can be no such thing as the New Zealand voice—any more than there can be a New Zealand gait. Voice is a personal attribute and there are as many New Zealand voices as there are New Zealanders. The quality of the voice is, as I have suggested, a highly complicated thing. There could be neither profit nor sense in reducing all New Zealand voices to a "least common denominator," eliminating colour, quality and all the other characteristic things that give voices their identities. What remains would, of course, be the New Zealand Voice. I suspect that you would be left with a column of air vibrating "in vacuo." And serve you right.

There are, I suppose, certain physiological factors involved in the New Zealander's make-up that I know nothing about. It may be that these make your columns of air vibrate in a peculiar way. It may be that living in the Southern Hemisphere has modified the shape of your head resonators. You know, of course, that British children are convinced that you walk on your head and that you retain a grip on this globe simply by the enormously prehensile hands you have. It may be that the excellence of the food you eat may have some odd effect on your voice boxes. I don't know. And I don't care. Although I am sure that quacks could be found to sponsor either of those theories.

The only thing I do know is what my ear tells me. That is, that New Zealand voices, like the voices that I have heard in Europe, America and Africa, are extraordinarily individual instruments. Like all other voices, they are instruments whose inherent beauties are more or less universally ignored — instruments abused to a degree that surpasses belief even in a world that is so prodigal in the abuse of beauty.

My ear tells me too, that in most, but not all, New Zealand voices, the production is strongly nasal, that is, that the speech-current is strongly and wrongly nasalised. "New Zealand voices are extraordinarily individual instruments" But this is a fault



that is shared by many English-speaking countries. And already we are talking about speech-currents and not voice. It is so easy to step over the demarcation line.

If voices are strongly individual, speech tends to be governed by "herd" principles. We know how infectious "accents" (as we quite wrongly call them) can be. Habits and mannerisms of speech are generally shared by a community. Such habits and mannerisms have many and diverse origins, and can usually cast interesting sidelights on the history of the community. But so many of these characteristic mannerisms of one community correspond to the identical mannerisms of a wholly unrelated community that the historian of such things is nowadays casting around for a theory that will explain what appears to be the simultaneous and independent generation of characteristic speech-values in widely different parts of the world. So far the historian has ignored human perversity as an explanation. Personally I favour human perversity or human idleness.

## Idle Tongues

An idle tongue, a rigid jaw, atrophied labial muscles. These will account for most of the habits and mannerisms that colour New Zealand speech. Just as they account for a great number of characteristically South African sounds. Listen to a South African saying "yes" and compare it with the word as you hear it pronounced in New Zealand and you will learn how consistently and universally perverse we can be.

Then there is speed. Most New Zealanders speak too quickly. Their enthusiasm outruns their technical control, and this has disastrous results. It is a great pity to speak so fast. Listen to this:

In all kinds of speech, either pleasant, grave, severe or ordinary, it is convenient to speak leisurely and rather drawingly than hastily; because hasty speech confounds the memory and oftentimes, besides unseemliness, drives a man either to nonplus or unseemly stammering, harping upon that which should follow; whereas a slow speech confirmeth the memory, addeth a conceit of wisdom to the hearer, besides a seemliness of speech and countenance.

A practical man, Lord Bacon, was he not?

By and large, there are no fundamentally unhealthy sounds in New Zealand speech. There are none of the sounds that mar so much of the speech of our industrial cities in Britain—sounds that are the legacy of slums and bad factory conditions. For these social conditions can

affect voice and speech just as they affect bone-development and gait.

But you do cherish in your speech certain deviations from what we call Standard English. As a race, you are not very good at short vowels. You would, for instance, rather say "yees" than "yes"; "mulk" rather than "milk"; and "bull" rather than "bill." Your diphthongs frequently expire in a drawl or resolve themselves into triphthongs. I can't hope to reproduce exactly what happens to the old speech-training tag, "How now brown cow," but it sounds something like this: "Heyow Neyow Breyown Ceyow." Your long vowels tend to be placed in the wrong part of the mouth—"harm," "there" for example. And the things you do to that final "y" sound—"Anthonee, glorie!"

I know that these are simply mannerisms, habits of speech. But in themselves they add nothing to the beauty of the English language. If you would like to learn how ugly they are, ask a good singer to sing them for you.

Casting a quick (and tactful) glance at your consonants, may I observe that, as a whole, New Zealand tongues are idle. The "l" sound is treacherous. Your plosives, too, tend to disappear without trace. And just a word about the way you "manhandle" the name of your country. It is not a difficult name. In itself, it is a lovely chain of sounds. But is it to be "New Zealand" or "Nu Zilnd?" And if so, why?

And there I call a halt. I should like to have spoken about New Zealand speech rhythms, which give more of a truly national character to your speech than any of the deviations from Standard English that I have quoted. But the subject is difficult and technical. Besides, no mere visitor could deal adequately with it. It is one for a New Zealander; and it is a study that will demand years of close attention and careful recording.

I have confined myself to more obvious if less pleasant features of your speech and voices—the idleness, rigidity, nasalisation and precipitancy. Whether the deviations from Standard English that these generate are to remain characteristically national noises, or whether they will ultimately disappear, depends upon how much care and attention you are going to devote to speech training in education.

For speech is never static. It develops. Its virtues flourish; or its vices, unchecked, become more vicious. We, you and I, must make up our minds whether or not we consider the purity of English worth preserving. But that is another tale, and my hard-won Conclusion seems to be about to become another, and even more sententious, Introduction. And that would never do.

