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Language & Politics 3

Correct Pronunciation and the Millennium

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I've engaged in the topic of pronunciation before in *ET* (*ET* 38). Not surprising -- it's close to my heart. I actually remember the revelation I had in my very first class in linguistics, in 1969, with Yngve Olsson at the University of Newcastle. In that class we learnt the difference between *descriptive* and *prescriptive* approaches to language, and the revelation was (of course) that non-posh English might not be *wrong*. I had heard a different story from schoolteachers in Middlesbrough, one of whom had complained that Middlesbrough English "isn't even a dialect, just nasty vowel sounds."

My Masters thesis (in 1972) and my first publication (*Transactions of the Philological Society* 1974) were on Thomas Spence, a radical political writer who was active (first in Newcastle and then in London) from 1775 to 1814. Spence published numerous tracts which advocated the rights of working people ("the Swinish Multitude") and, especially, the nationalisation of the land. He was imprisoned three times for various political reasons, including selling Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*. David Abercrombie first brought Spence to the attention of linguists in 1948, not that Spence ever became exactly a household name. Spence believed that one of the obstacles to social equality was social difference in pronunciation. The solution to this was to ensure that everyone pronounced words correctly (George Bernard Shaw had the same idea a century later).

Spence thought that correct pronunciation could be achieved by reforming English spelling so that the pronunciation was transparent from the written form. Wider literacy

was also desirable, and a systematic spelling would help learners of all kinds. Spence therefore developed a rather good phonemic transcription, and used it in several of his publications, which seems to have reduced their readability for his contemporaries, who had no idea what the symbols were supposed to mean. Even those sympathetic to his political stance ridiculed his spelling system. His use of his own spelling, in about half of his publications, no doubt reduced the numbers of those who actually read his tracts even further than his radicalism would predict. As one of his sympathisers (Hall) told him (in a letter of June 9 1802):

I cannot conceive what should induce you to disguise your work with such a whimsical kind of Spelling, which renders it so difficult to read, that I could more easily read a book in four or five dead or foreign languages, than I could read yours in my native tongue. You say that it is not formed from mere vulgar and uncertain sound, but is systematic. But to acquire a system so as to use it readily requires too much time, for the reading a single work.

Mugglestone’s book, among others on similar topics, shows how some writers have thought that improving pronunciation will lead to people being better, while others (more realistically, perhaps) merely think it will allow people to advance in society. Spence went even further than this. He thought that bringing about social reform so that everyone was equal (a common and correct pronunciation being a part of this) would bring about the millennium. As he wrote himself in “S□m□■•□■m□□” (1803), using the later version of his orthography, which allows digraphs for some sounds and shows vowels in unstressed syllables in the full form:

‡And dho mi bwk’s †m kwer L†ngo
 I w†m †t sm□nd tw St. D□m†ngo:
 Tw dhm Rm p♦bb•†k □v dhm †Ink□z,
 F□r □n m□gz□mpl h□w tw fram L□□□z.
 F□r hw k□n t□ b♦†t dhm M†m□ne♦m
 Ma tak †ts riz fr□m mi pwr Kr□ne♦m.

In Singapore I was among the first people (other pioneers included Mary Tay and David Bloom) to advocate the treatment of Singapore English as a variety of English rather than an accretion of errors. This approach has had some ups and downs in Singapore (for an example of the opposing view see *ET* 34), but in the 90s it seems to have finally become the dominant view that as far as accent is concerned, Singapore English is OK. On 26 July 1996 Chee Fook Keon wrote to the major English-language newspaper, *The Straits Times*, complaining about the “fake and exaggerated American accents” of some presenters on Singapore television, and contrasting this behaviour with that of “some of our country’s brightest and ablest, like our ministers, who have spent time overseas [and who] still sound so eloquently local”. This topic (a recurring one) ran and ran, culminating on 11 August in a wonderful (and unfortunately anonymous) piece in a “lifestyle” page (**box**) which satirised the three views, and portrayed Singlish, American English, and British English. Singlish, incidentally, is heard on Singapore’s television only in comedy shows, and then only in a very mild form. *ET* readers will be especially interested to see what the stigmatised Britishisms are (super long vowels, and the GO diphthong).

Now the thing about eye-dialect is that it’s all based on your normal reference point. The eye-dialect spelling *tomarto* (as opposed to *tomahto*) only makes sense if you speak a variety of English that does *not* pronounce post-vocalic r. So the Singlish text in the *Straits Times* is spelt normally, with the variety being conveyed by grammar and lexis. Because it’s Singapore English that’s seen as accentless. Similarly the man who telephoned to give warning of the pipe bomb at Atlanta’s Centennial Park was described in some of the world’s press as speaking “accentless English”. Presumably that meant he had the same accent as those who heard him.

So will this relativistic idea bring about Spence's egalitarian millennium? Of course not. What people think of as "accentless" English is different in different places, but it's always the English of people of high prestige. Geographical inequalities seem to be easier to eradicate than social ones. Having multiple norms does seem a move in the right direction though.

References

Mugglestone, Lynda. 1995. *'Talking proper': the rise of accent as social symbol*.
Oxford: Clarendon Press.

[969 words, excluding box]

GLOSSARY [to add under box]

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| ah | particle, solicits agreement. |
| aksy | affected. |
| ang-moh | literally “red-hair” -- a person of European ancestry. |
| lor | particle, to add emphasis. |
| outstation | out of Singapore |
| TCS | Television Corporation of Singapore |
| wan (probably). | sometimes spelt <i>one</i> , a particle that emphasis a nominal element |
