6. World English? How an Australian Invented ‘Good American Speech’

Desley Deacon

In May 1922, Windsor P. Daggett wrote admiringly in the American entertainment magazine *Billboard* about the preaching of the Reverend Frederick W. Norwood, who was visiting from City Temple, London. ‘He surprised the congregation,’ Daggett observed, ‘by talking “just like an American”. At least his speech was so free from any trace of regional dialect that some of the audience was a little surprised to think that Mr Norwood was an Englishman.’ ‘Not a British intonation entered into his preaching,’ Daggett went on, ‘and his general impression of quiet force and normal speech was so similar to that of the regular pastor, Rev. Charles E. Jefferson, that one noted very little difference in their habits of speech.’ Curious to know how Rev. Norwood had rid himself of his British ‘accent’, Daggett went to visit him, and concluded after talking to him that ‘he never had any accent’. ‘He comes from Australia,’ Daggett discovered, ‘where he has lived most of the time in the cities of Melbourne and Adelaide. The cultured speech of these cities appears to be the standard speech that has no local earmarks.’ ‘That is the test,’ Daggett concluded, ‘to be free from local peculiarities.’

Commenting a few months later on a letter in the *New York Times* suggesting that the best speakers in England were now imitating the American accent, Daggett used the Rev. Norwood again as an example of good speech that avoided what he called the ‘affected ultra-British, class dialect’ of the ‘la-de-da Britisher’, which was no longer accepted as cultured speech and standard English. ‘When this letter writer is told that the English are “imitating [the] American accent,” he is uninformed,’ Daggett concluded:

The Englishman is simply dropping his class dialect and mannerisms of speech, and is adopting the standard of pronunciation that is widely accepted by the ‘best speakers’ in England and in the English-speaking world. When Rev. Frederick W. Norwood, of London, preaches at the Broadway Tabernacle, New York, and talks ‘just like an American’, he is not ‘imitating’ American speech. He talks as he has been accustomed to talk in Melbourne, Australia, and in London, England. He speaks English, standard English, with no local flourishes.

Daggett was writing in his regular column in *Billboard*, ‘The Spoken Word’. Week after week, from 1921 to 1926, Daggett commented in detail on the speech of actors appearing on the New York stage and of visiting lecturers and preachers.
such as Rev. Norwood. With all the zeal of the converted, he proselytised for what he called ‘Standard English’. ‘Standard English’ was speech—like Norwood’s—that was free of ‘regional dialect’. ‘There is a standard of English which can be heard in good society over the world so that it sounds as familiar and normal in Melbourne as it does in London or New York City,’ he wrote. ‘The actor in straight parts should be a master of that speech, and the preacher makes friends by speaking a universal language.’ ‘Considering that Mr Norwood fitted so naturally into Dr Jefferson’s pulpit, I am bound to conclude that the London audience listening to Dr Jefferson at City Temple will say, “He doesn’t sound a bit like an American,” which is very much the sort of remark to be desired.’

Daggett (1877–1958) came from an old New England family. After graduating from Brown University, he moved from instructor to Professor of Speech at the University of Maine. After serving briefly in World War I, he moved to New York, where he was, from 1927, Professor of Speech at the Hebrew Union College. He was also, for many years, theatre critic for The Boston Transcript. In 1920, he enrolled for graduate study at Columbia University, where he came in contact with William Tilly, with whom he studied throughout the next decade. Like many others who encountered Tilly, Daggett became a fervent disciple. His Billboard (and later Theatre Monthly) columns were an advertisement for Tilly’s ideas of a universal English language.

Tilly (1860–1935) was arguably the most influential speech instructor in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. He and his students (or rather disciples) decided how Americans spoke to the world through theatre and through film. Tilly was not an American; nor was he British. He was, like the Rev. Norwood, an Australian who began his career as a teacher at Ironbark, New South Wales, the site, as all Australians know, of ‘Banjo’ Paterson’s well-known poem The Man from Ironbark and now the village of Stuart Town.

He was born in 1860, the son of Charles Tilley, a city missionary in Sydney, and his Irish wife Elizabeth, who came from the distressed Irish Protestant gentry family of Edgerton. Ian Clunies Ross, son of William Tilly’s sister Hannah, describes his mother in his memoirs as proud of a supposed noble ancestry, fiercely status conscious and possessed of a keen, progressive drive—characteristics that seem to have been shared by her brother William.

William Tilly attended the highly regarded Fort Street School and, encouraged by the Hon. John Fairfax, deacon of the Pitt Street Congregational Church (and founder of the Sydney Morning Herald), he continued his studies at the University of Sydney, from 1879–80, specialising in languages. (The Rev. Charles Badham, a classics scholar from Oxford, was Dean of the Faculty of Arts and probably taught Tilly; and the eccentric Etienne Thibaud, a Doctor of Letters from the University of Paris, was employed as Modern Languages lecturer from 1882.
He, in turn, could well have been a student of the other great reforming linguist of the time, Paul Passy.) After his year at the University of Sydney, Tilly taught for the New South Wales Education Department in Ironbark, Wellington and Dubbo. In 1890, at the age of 30, he took his growing family to Germany. There he studied at the University of Marburg under the phonetician Wilhelm Vietor, the pioneer of what is now known as immersion language-teaching techniques, and he learned from Vietor his revolutionary ‘direct method’ of foreign language study.

Language study during this period had been revolutionised by Henry Sweet (1845–1912), a prominent member of the European movement of the mid-1880s to reform modern language teaching. His radical Elementarbuch des gesprochenen Englisch (Primer of Spoken English) (1885), written initially in German for German students of English, was extremely influential. Highly regarded in Europe and president of the International Phonetic Association from 1887 until his death, Sweet had no university post in his native England until he was appointed to the newly established readership in phonetics at Oxford in 1901 at the age of 56. In 1890, he published a translation of his Primer of Spoken English and a Primer of Phonetics; and his Practical Study of Languages (1899) discussed in detail the theories and practices of teaching and learning languages.  

William Tilly established the Institut Tilly, first in Marburg, then in Berlin, where students came from all over the world for intensive and rigorous language tuition. Among his students was Daniel Jones (1881–1967), who became the pre-eminent British phonetician of the early twentieth century. Tilly’s Australian students included Margaret Bailey (1879–1955)—later the gifted and inspiring headmistress of Ascham School in Sydney, where she taught French by the direct method12 — E. G. Waterhouse (1881–1977)13 and A. R. Chisholm (1888–1981), professors of German and English at the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne respectively, who also followed his method of teaching, and Edmund Herring (1892–1982), later Chief Justice of Victoria.

Tilly and his sons were interned at the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and were able to get to New York in 1917. From that time until just before his death in 1935, he taught English and phonetics at summer sessions and extension courses at Columbia University.15

Teaching as he did in extension and summer courses, Tilly attracted many high school teachers and actors. He is always described as a strict ‘Prussian’ disciplinarian, but he must also have been a charismatic figure, because he inspired great love and admiration in his students, who spread his ideas through the New York school system and acting schools. Daggett describes him in a 1923 Billboard article as holding his mostly female audience at Hunter College spellbound as he lectured on, of all things, the letter ‘r’—an obsession the two
shared. As Daggett concluded in his article, ‘The teachers swear by Tilly, and they are going to knock the “r” out of New “York” and several other places.’

Part of Tilly’s innovation as a proponent of the direct method was to teach speech patterns based on the spoken rather than the written word—and to use the relatively new International Phonetic Alphabet developed by Henry Sweet to accurately describe each sound.

His greatest contribution, however, was the championing of what he called ‘World English’—what his American disciples called ‘Good American Speech’ (as opposed to ‘General American’, which derived from the mid-west). World English was the sort of English the Australian Rev. Norwood spoke: speech that did not follow any regional dialect, including that of the British upper class. This was an invented accent that was considered appropriate to ‘educated’, ‘cultivated’ and ‘cultured’ English-speaking people all over the world. It did resemble, however, some New England speech patterns and resembled closely the non-regional variety of educated British English that Daniel Jones described in his 1918 *Outline of English Pronunciation* and called ‘Received Pronunciation’ in his 1926 edition—a book whose many editions remained authoritative guides throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Tilly and his followers considered World English not only more intelligible to more people all over the world than any other dialect, but more beautiful. Indeed, his student Marguerite De Witt, who taught at Wellesley College, used her books *Euphon English in America* (1924) and *Our Oral Word, As Social and Economic Factor* (1928) to evangelise for what she called ‘Euphonetics’.

Tilly arrived in New York just at the right moment. Dr Frederick Martin (1881–1950) had recently been appointed Director of Speech Improvement for New York’s public schools, and the training and licensing of teachers in this new area was urgent. When Martin left in 1921, there was a long struggle for his position, which was won eventually in 1928 when Tilly’s protégé Letitia Raubicheck, chair of the elocution department at the prestigious Julia Richman High School, replaced the unlicensed Agnes Birmingham. (Birmingham had co-edited the textbook *First Lessons in Speech Improvement* in 1922, which favoured General American over World English.) An influential figure on the faculties of Hunter College and New York University, Raubicheck further professionalised speech teaching; she instituted school oratorical contests and regular radio broadcasts for schools; and she kept what she called the speech problems of New Yorkers before the public with regular reports in the press.

A typical story in the *New York Times* in 1948 was headlined ‘Speech aid is given to 30,000 in schools’; and, three years later, ‘56,640 students treated’. Another Tilly student, Sophie Pray, who was president of the William Tilly Association—which was a sort of Tilly fan club—wrote the textbook *Graded Objectives for Teaching Good American Speech* for use in teacher training. ‘Good
speech signifies the possibility of readier spiritual integration with, and membership in, the cultured group in which most of us want to live as citizens,’ she wrote. ‘Ignorance may be condoned, lack of dexterity may be excused, but faulty speech and foreign accent are indelible signs of social inferiority.’

Tilly’s ambitions for a World English fitted well with visions of internationalism or transnationalism, which flourished in the wake of the devastation of the Great War. New York intellectuals Randolph Bourne and Elsie Clews Parsons proselytised for the idea throughout the war, claiming that the United States had the potential to become what Bourne called in an influential 1916 article ‘the first transnational nation’. Broadway theatre was already considered transnational in this way, attracting the best actors from all over the world. The actors whose voices Daggett praised most fully in his columns were those whose regional accents had been sheared away by performing all over the world. One actor he particularly praised was a Scot who had performed, not only in London and New York, but also in India, China, the East Indies and Australia.

This vision of transnationalism was held also by movie executives such as Walter Wanger, executive producer at Paramount’s New York studios from 1924 to 1931. Wanger saw films as ‘foreign offices’, with the potential to bring about world understanding and world peace much more effectively than diplomacy. When sound was introduced to films in 1927, Wanger and others saw this literally as an opportunity to speak to the world, and it was imperative financially and culturally to find a voice the world would listen to and understand.

Tilly’s World English, with its deliberate lack of ‘localisms’, fitted perfectly with this transnational ideal. The British diplomat and spy Bruce Lockhart, who studied under what he called Tilly’s ‘Spartan and Pitiless’ regime before World War I, asserted in his memoirs that Tilly ‘had done more for Anglo–German friendship than any man living’. His American disciple De Witt emphasised the diplomatic purpose of their work in the dedication of her 1926 book, Our Oral Word, illustrated top and bottom by drawings of London and New York:

To Page and Bryce
Ambassadors
of
Head
and
Heart
Throughout
the
English-Speaking World
and thereby
World Statesmen of Goodwill
Goodwill United by the Many Seas.
Tilly’s influence on the speech used in theatre and film was enormous. At the Windsor P. Daggett Studio—‘Home of the Spoken Word’—on West Seventy-Fourth and Broadway, Daggett gave classes in voice production and pronunciation and produced his Spoken-Word records for mail-order students, to whom he also supplied the International Phonetic Alphabet and written lessons. He also lectured on ‘our American speech and voice’ under the auspices of Theatre Arts Monthly, along with influential theatre personalities John Mason Brown and Kenneth MacGowan. From 1923, he taught what he called ‘The Spoken Word’ at Richard Boleslavsky’s American Laboratory Theatre and in 1926 he was on the faculty of the International Theatre Arts Institute with Brown and Frederick Kiesler.

Also at the American Laboratory Theatre was Margaret Prendergast McLean, Tilly’s star pupil. She was at the same time Head of the Department of English Diction at the Leland Powers School of Theatre in Boston. In the next decade, she taught at the Carnegie Institute of Technology and the Cornish School, Seattle. In the late 1930s, she followed her colleague at the Lab School Maria Ouspenskaya to Hollywood, where she taught at Ouspenskaya’s Acting School. It was she who wrote the textbook Good American Speech, first published in 1927, which set out the ideology and practice of teaching by the Tilly method.

McLean’s most successful pupil at the Powers School was Edith Warman, who joined her at the Lab School and began her own apprenticeship with Tilly at Columbia University. Warman became a speech instructor at Carnegie Tech’s theatre training program, where she established her reputation as the most eminent theatre speech trainer in America and wrote her influential textbook Speak with Distinction. When she retired from Carnegie in 1968, she was hired by John Houseman as a founding member of the faculty of the new theatre program at the Juilliard School in New York, where she trained another generation of actors and teachers before her death in 1981. Her former pupil Timothy Monich is considered the reigning voice coach today, and his students use a much revised version of Speak with Distinction, which he has edited. To return the circle to Australia, Timothy Monich, according to a recent article in the New Yorker, is the speech coach of Australian film star Cate Blanchett.

Film scholar Miriam Hansen argues that American mainstream cinema developed a ‘global vernacular’ (what she calls ‘an international modernist idiom on a mass basis’), whose transnational appeal derived from diverse domestic traditions, discourses and interests, including those of the cosmopolitan Hollywood community. ‘Hollywood did not just circulate images and sounds,’ she argues, ‘it produced and globalized a new sensorium; it constituted…new subjectivities and subjects.’ In other words, American films affected how people around the world looked, how they felt, how they talked and what senses they...
privileged; and they did this by putting on the screen a set of behaviours that came, as it were, from nowhere and everywhere.

I would suggest that the theatre was an important precursor of the new, international, sensory culture Hansen attributes to film. Theatre was, from the nineteenth century, a global industry whose touring companies penetrated deep into local communities. (Richard Waterhouse has shown this beautifully in his study of American companies touring nineteenth-century Australia with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.)\(^{40}\) Theatre was an important resource for the international women’s movement from as early as the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union’s campaigns of the 1880s; and female actors were early models of modernity.

What is more, many early films were transferred directly from the stage, and personnel—actors, producers, directors and writers—moved backwards and forwards between the two mediums. From the mid-1920s to the early 1930s, many films were made in New York, and stage actors and producers mixed socially with those in film. In addition, Hollywood producers such as MGM’s boy wonder Irving Thalberg came regularly to New York to decide which Broadway shows to buy, to see what was fashionable and what different audiences enjoyed. They would often film the performance as a guide to the movie. And, of course, they often persuaded the Broadway stars to move into the movies. If we are going to talk about a global vernacular, we have to take Broadway theatre seriously as one of its important sources.

As Tilly’s story reminds us, Australia (and perhaps the other British colonies) played an interesting role in defining and popularising a new sort of universal speech that suited this developing global vernacular. I noted earlier that Daggett admired most the voices of those actors and preachers whose regional peculiarities had been sheared off through having to make themselves understood and socially placed in a large and diverse number of countries. Australia was fortunately placed to produce such actors, as it was the centre of a geographically and culturally diverse theatre circuit that extended from Britain, through South Africa and the East, and through the Pacific to the United States.\(^{41}\) In addition, its immigrant, upwardly mobile population flocked enthusiastically to elocution lessons, where they learned to speak, not like the ‘la-de-da’ British upper class, but in the new invented accent of World English.

The actress Judith Anderson is a good example of this: the youngest daughter of a deserted mother who ran a school shop in Adelaide, she excelled at elocution as a child and went into the theatre, where her voice—thoatly, refined but not ‘la-de-da’, and expressive—was her fortune on Broadway and in London.\(^{42}\) Daggett admired the speech of many of the Australasian actors he heard on Broadway, and he often picked out Anderson’s voice as a model of universal English speech.\(^{43}\)
Miriam Hansen saw the new global vernacular disseminated by Hollywood as deriving from diverse domestic traditions, discourses and interests, including those of the cosmopolitan Hollywood community. Australians were part of that cosmopolitan community right from the start, and the New York theatre—where many of them flourished—was often the filter through which their cultural influence was refined and passed on to the world. I want to suggest in this chapter that one of their major cultural influences in the late 1920s and early 1930s was providing for this new world medium an intelligible cultured voice that was not ‘la-de-da’: a voice that was not recognisably from anywhere, a voice that was from everywhere and nowhere.

ENDNOTES


5 Windsor Pratt Daggett enrolled in the Graduate Faculties (now the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences) in 1911–12, 1920–26 and 1929–30, but did not graduate. Information courtesy of Jennifer Ulrich, Associate Archivist, Columbia University Archives and Colombiana Library.


7 Stuart Town is a town of about 300 people 34km south-east of Wellington and 380km north-west of Sydney. It is a service centre to the surrounding area, where sheep and cattle farming and orchards are the major enterprises.


14 *British Australasian*, 31 December 1914.


Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity

28 Lockhart, R.H. Bruce 1933, Memoirs of a British Agent, Putnam’s Sons, New York and London; and Lockhart, R.H. Bruce 1934, Retreat from Glory, Putnam’s Sons, New York and London.
29 Advertisement, Billboard, 5 January and 15 March 1924.
43 See Daggett, Windsor P. 1924, ‘The Spoken Word’, Billboard, 12 January 1924, pp. 39, 42 on Irby Marshall (‘She has a woman’s voice that one seldom hears in America. It is rich in tone, low pitched and aristocratic without being in any way “gentlel” or affected’) and Leonard Willey; for Anderson, see Billboard, 10 May 1924, p. 40 (‘Miss Anderson’s voice has never been more flexible and flowingly expressive’).