

7. 'The Australian Has a Lazy Way of Talking': Australian character and accent, 1920s–1940s

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The Australian has a lazy way of talking through closed teeth. Much remains to be done.¹

In his 1930 text, *Australia*, W. K. Hancock was perhaps more attuned to speech than other Australian historians either before or since his publication. In discussing the descendants of Australian convicts, he observed astutely that one clue for identifying them was through language. We 'may suspect', he observes, 'that there has come down to us, by subtle hidden channels, a vague unmeasured inheritance from those early days'.²

Hancock believed that it was absurd to try to replicate the English accent and 'attempt the impossible task of impressing upon scoffing pupils Oxford English thrice removed'. Teachers, he advised, would do 'better to develop the resources of this [the Australian] legitimate accent'.³ He described the Australian accent as 'thin and narrow in its range of tone', but 'expressive and pleasant to the ear...The Australian intonation has in it something of heat-dazzle in "the land of lots o' time"'. What was this Australian speech?

It is smaller and simpler than the vocabulary of middle-class Englishmen, for Australia does not tolerate forms of thought and expression (such as irony) which are perplexing or offensive to the average man; and has also rejected, almost at a blow, the beautiful names of an intimate countryside—fields and meadows, woods, copse, spinney and thicket, dale, glen, vale and comb, brook, stream and rivulet, inn, and village. But in their place there is the Bush and a new vocabulary of the Bush—billabong, dingo, damper, bushwacker...Here, surely, is new wealth, expressive of distinctive and vigorous life, material for an individual literature.⁴

He observed how Australian words had their basis in the past; many came from Aborigines, some from the gold-rushes and others 'are originals coined off-hand out of experience and a matter-of-fact humour'.⁵

A study of the discussions about Australian speech from the 1920s to the early 1940s provides an examination of the ways in which a preoccupation with the Australian accent became a means of exploring Australianness. This period amplified the paradox of loyalty—at once to nation and to empire. The imagined

community of Britishness defined the nation, but the significance of the distinctive Australian contribution expanded gradually to overshadow the narrative of empire. Even though there were subtle signs of this shift early, the peculiar 'double loyalty' endured during the inter-war years and early into the World War II period.

This chapter looks first at how popular discussion about the Australian accent and speech was promoted within a firmly embedded notion that Australia was a part of the British Empire. The tensions this created are considered in relation to the development of an acceptable, distinctive Australian sound. Another key theme consistent throughout these discussions is the understanding of speech as a form of moral instruction: whether it be within an individual, a national or international forum, speech and its sound were discussed in this way, pointing to correct behaviour and enunciation as a statement about moral worth in collective and individual terms.

Australian accent: 'the detestable snuffle'

Since the nineteenth century, educationists, politicians, social reformers and intellectuals have discussed the importance of speaking well and how a distinctive Australian accent does and should sound. Visitors to the colonies especially observed the distinctiveness of this speech. Louise Meredith, who lived in New South Wales from 1839 to 1844, documented the ways in which 'those born after the parents arrive in the colony have the detestable snuffle. This is an enigma which passes my sagacity to solve.'⁶ Richard Twopenny commented in 1883 how the locally born gave scant attention to language and speech. In the colonial girl, he observed, '[l]anguages and other accomplishments are either neglected or slurred over'.⁷ Mark Twain observed how when he visited Ballarat in 1897, the English spoken there was 'free from impurities...It is shorter than ordinary English—that is, it is more compressed. At first you have some difficulty in understanding it when it is spoken as rapidly as the orator whom I have quoted speaks it...I handed him a chair, he bowed and said: "Q".' This reduced form of English hardly had a sound; it was 'very soft and pleasant; it takes all the hardness and harshness out of our tongue and gives to it a delicate whispery and vanishing cadence which charms the ear like the faint rustling of the forest leaves'.⁸

Such a description, however, was lost on other local commentators, who expressed despair at the Australian accent. The most common judgement levelled against the accent was that of laziness. At the turn of the century, one writer noted in the *Bulletin* how laziness was identified as the chief cause of various deficiencies:

The habit of talking with the mouth half open all the time is another manifestation of the national 'tired feeling'. Many of the more typical

bumpkins never shut their mouths. This is often a symptom of post-nasal adenoids and hypertrophy of the tonsils; *the* characteristic Australian disease. Such speakers produce pseudo *b*, *m*, *p*, with the lower lip and the upper teeth.⁹

The South Australian accent, in particular, was a combination 'polyhybrid of American, Irish brogue, cockney, county, and broken English'. One feature of this was 'tongue-laziness', and an anxiety to 'communicate as much as possible by means of the fewest and easiest sounds'. This laziness was manifest in the clipping of sentences and in the slurring of sounds:

The method of producing sounds with the tongue...the false palate, the vibrating column of air leaving by both mouth and nose and slurring into a sound by means of an antesyllable, requires much less care, exertion, and expenditure of breath than that of making 'clean' sounds with the open mouth and proper use of the tongue and larynx.¹⁰

This accusation of laziness continued well into the twentieth century. A debate in the *Argus* during the late 1930s brought out the purists. 'Aint it 'ot' wrote in 1938 that since his/her son began to attend school, s/he had noticed that he 'developed an appalling manner of speech, and definitely an accent'. 'I learn with dismay that we have no professor of speech in our universities...Now that most schools have the wireless, could we not have cultured talks on this matter?'¹¹ Respondents endorsed these comments, with arguments for better educational services.¹² The professor of Education at the University of Melbourne, Professor G. S. Browne, argued that Australians needed to develop a speech with distinctive characteristics of their own: it 'should be the King's English, pleasantly spoken and probably with that peculiar resonance which was characteristic of Australian voices', although there was no need for 'Australian speech to include the great number of ugly sounds which it did now'.¹³ J. Sutton Crow of the University Conservatorium argued that '[w]hat Australians generally seem to suffer from may be called "lip, tongue, and jaw laziness", leading to a lack of clear enunciation and a mumbling and slovenly mode of speech'.¹⁴ Alfred Hart, a judge of the Melbourne Shakespeare Society, believed that mistakes in pronunciation were due to laziness and 'sloppy vocalisation'.¹⁵ Slovenly speech in children was especially 'deplored',¹⁶ while some argued that the 'lazy mouth and slovenly tongue were noticeable wherever English was spoken'.¹⁷

How could laziness be a part of modernity? Such laziness in speech suggested a lack of discipline, a poor standard in communication and a lack of moral standing. The ideal was a controlled and disciplined expression of the English language, which suggested a fashioning of the self that was more acceptable to polite, middle-class society. In another context, Dipesh Chakrabarty observes

the way in which in Calcutta, 'informal, and unrigorous conversations' in public aroused suspicion and criticism. The social practice of '*ada*'—long, informal conversations—attracted accusations of idleness.¹⁸ In Australia, it was a national question: through speech, it was hoped that a distinctive Australian identity would be preserved, but one that maintained connection to the English family of languages.

Whether it was English or Australian, some thought simply that the Australian accent was getting worse. James Green of the *Bulletin* argued that in Australia the public schools 'are not doing much in the way of teaching the rising generation to speak King's English, and our educated classes are themselves tainted'.¹⁹ There was much discussion in the 1930s about the decline of 'Australian English' and the need to improve the standard of speech. There were certainly class and gender issues related to these questions. It was observed in 1933 by the *Sydney Morning Herald* that boys, 'especially at an early adolescence, appear to have a contempt for correctly modeled speech, which they regard as effeminate'. Even those who did speak well were under suspicion. The 'clear-cut, well-modulated speech of a speaker of polished diction is regarded with suspicion, and even with hostility, by the majority, for the insufficient reason that he has the temerity to be different from the herd'.²⁰ The best way to bridge such class divisions was to develop a national pride in speech. In fact, the 'best speech' was that which obliterated class differences, but it seemed to keep gender differences alive:

It is the sort of speech which will carry a man anywhere, which does not attract undue attention to itself, which is understood by the greatest number of people in every part of the country which suggests that the speaker is a man of decent education who is used to mixing with a variety of his kind and does not announce his birthplace or consign him to any class.

It was clear that the Englishman's definition was inapplicable, and an inadequate prescription for Australia.

We would define Australian-English as that pleasant oral communication which is audible and instantly apprehended by reason of its clear enunciation and rate of articulation; which is expressed in correct grammatical form and is free from solecisms; it has the vowel quality and absence of nasality associated with a person of respectable attainments, and the inflections are such as do not provoke a sense of antagonism or resentment in the auditor by virtue of such speech.

Why did Australians slur their speech and have such problems with it? Climatic and environmental changes were identified as important, but above all, the reason for 'mumbling speech' was 'diffidence and even laziness'. The fight for

'good speech is a noble ideal, worthy of all ranks; the language is one that should stimulate the pride of our young and virile nation'.²¹

The debate about the Australian accent preoccupied educationists. In a lengthy engagement with the issues of the Australian 'accent', John K. Ewers argued in 1937 that although the Australian accent was 'a superior speech' to the purer English, we should be careful before deluding ourselves 'into believing that all is well with Australian speech'. Australian speech should 'not be left to develop in a haphazard way into something which is careless and slipshod'. Two methods were proposed: to get rid of the accent altogether, 'before it becomes too deeply rooted', or to maintain it as it was. Drawing on the conventional explanation that speech was determined environmentally by Australian conditions, Ewers argued that it would be impossible to improve the national Australian accent. Within these 'climatic and temperamental limitations', however, Australian speech should be enhanced.²²

In other quarters, the teaching of elocution was identified as one means of enhancement. In his forthright publication *Correct English, Public Speaking, Elocution, Voice Production*, C. N. Baeyertz argued for a celebration of Australian accents; he recognised that Australians did not need to sound British, but nevertheless, they did not speak well. Indeed, for Baeyertz, this was a major tragedy.

We are in the presence of tragedy; and tragedy is never less than quite serious...The tragedy of all this is that we Oss-stryke-yuns or Ozzies (as we are also apt to style ourselves) are usually in a state of ignorance (neither blessed nor in any sense blissful) as regards our general attitude to simple English speech, and that the depth of our ignorance is nowhere more murkily shown than in our habitual flattening of the easy and inoffensive vowels.²³

There was a deficiency in listening and in sound. Most young children suffered from a defect of sound, he observed: 'Their faulty pronunciation and indistinct articulation are almost entirely due to inadequate or perverted development of sound-perception. Ears have they, but they hear not.'²⁴ It was in this auditory capacity that there was a deficiency. The inability to listen was a dramatic shortcoming:

The ear of the average Australian child is obviously untrained. Bad teaching has so dulled his auditory sense that he no longer hears with distinctness and accuracy. It seems that he is never taught to listen to his own voice and detect his own errors of lips and tongue. In Australia, as a rule, the lips are little used in speech; they are immobile, mere obstacles in the way of sound-emission. They remain rigid, and behind them the Australian tongue is literally an unruly member.²⁵

The accent itself had deteriorated: 'It is beyond question that the Australian accent is becoming vastly more aggressive every year. In nine cases out of ten, we do not speak as accurately as our fathers and mothers, and our children know little of, and often care less for, "the well of English undefiled"'.²⁶

The work and writings of the elocution teacher E. Stanley Brookes reflect the move during the inter-war years for an appreciation of the development of an Australian—and not simply the replication of a British—accent. Brookes was a defender of the Australian accent and he argued that it was the English and not Australian accent that was offensive. 'The vast majority of the early settlers came from England and brought their cockney and other accents with them. Therefore our unmusical and ugly Australian accent is more English than Australian.'²⁷ An elocutionist 'of marked ability', Brookes was an advocate of a standardised pronunciation in Australia, but it was important that an Australian accent be 'attractive, not repulsive'. What was the best speech? He believed it was that which was clear and simple, nothing too affected: the 'glorious heritage of our English language is simple speech'. It was 'right and natural' that 'we should have an Australian accent'.

An appreciation of the subtleties of the English language was one of the key issues that concerned international as well as local authors—as well as the need to maintain some purity of speech. Moral instruction was never far removed from the commentary. Alison Hasluck announced that this would not only develop self-control and power, 'but that they are necessary adjuncts to the fullest expression of the subtleties and beauties of the English language'.²⁸ The sound of language and speech also posed a problem, as she saw it, and there was an urgent need to train the ear. The ear and organs must be trained by viva voce examples and by practice. Imperfect or wrong production of sound was often associated with tricks that marred facial expression as well as pronunciation. 'Immobility of the lips, a twist or contortion of the lips, a twist of the jaw, clenching the teeth, moving one side of the mouth more than the other—these faults should be dealt with.'²⁹

The bodily and social benefits of elocution were also considered important, so that correct speech became a branch of deportment and etiquette. Kathleen Rich, in her *The Art of Speech: A Handbook of Elocution*, published in London in 1932, identified the benefits of elocution in terms of 'gaining self-confidence and poise in speaking, not only in public and on the stage, but in social intercourse'; it was 'undoubtedly a benefit to health, especially to the nervous system, and to the chest and throat'.³⁰ Victor MacLure, in his 1928 elocution manual, which was distributed internationally throughout the Empire—in London, Bombay and Sydney—identified the need for elocution because of poor speech and the offensive use of it socially. He observes:

The shrill voice, no matter how clever or amusing the ideas it expresses, must in the end become an irritation. The indistinct speech, no matter how sound or revealing the thoughts it embodies, most surely will be found exhausting in the long run. One's ears cannot be absorbing ugly sound or straining to catch mumbled phrases for any length of time without some physical reaction. Think, indeed, how much the pleasant, musical, well-modulated voice is an asset in personal appeal.³¹

Learning to speak was therefore most valuable: 'By practice of reading aloud, of speaking up and out, of placing your vocalised breath rightly in your mouth, your voice takes on a brighter ring. It becomes pleasanter to hear.'³² There was a danger of losing the strength, vitality and originality of how English should be spoken unless this decline was corrected. Here again, the concern had cultural implications: 'It is time that something was done to arrest this decay in English speech...Your French is a snob. Your Spanish is a hidebound hidalgo. Your German is something of an unreceptive boor. But your English is a gentleman of easy manners who finds good in everything.'

The threat, however, was not from without; it was in fact from within a slothful and slovenly attitude to speech.

There is no danger of English losing its character through infusion of alien words. Time and again it has been completely invaded, only to emerge stronger than ever. If there is a danger threatening our language it is that it may lose its character through slovenly use in speech. We are become [sic] a nation of mumblers. Lispers, gutturalists, ventriloquists, mouth-breathers, butchers of sweet sounds. And our carelessness is threatening our most valuable heritage.³³

Like MacLure's book, Alexander Watson's *Speak Out! The Commonsense of Elocution* (1924) was published in London and circulated in Calcutta and Sydney. Elocution became part of the endeavour to speak well; it was pitched primarily as training for public speaking. The emphasis on the strained gesture and bodily movements are gone, but the stress on correct enunciation in conversation, distinct utterance and so on frame the instruction. Watson's aim in the volume was the 'clearness of voice and verbal audibility...[to] render it useful to a very wide public, and stimulate many to take pride in well-spoken English'.³⁴ The book was based on Watson's lectures to students when he was lecturer on the speaking voice at Birkbeck College, a post he relinquished to 'fulfil a long series of engagements in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States'. The lectures were also redelivered at Westminster College in Cambridge, among other places.³⁵ For Watson, it was not appropriate for correctness to be 'pedantic, formal, or pernickety'. This was probably as bad as, if not worse than, bad speech:

'Anything like an exhibition of obvious virtuosity, particularly in conversational speech, would be abhorrent.'³⁶

The teaching of a particular type of English dominated Australian schools. Jill Ker Conway recalls how the education she received in the 1930s and 1940s stressed this emphasis on speech, deportment and etiquette. When she enrolled in the exclusive Sydney girls' school Abbotsleigh, she found there was emphasis on English literature especially, and on speech and enunciation.

Our curriculum was inherited from Great Britain, and consequently it was utterly untouched by progressive notions in education. We took English grammar, complete with parsing and analysis, we were drilled in spelling and punctuation, we read English poetry and were tested in scansion, we read English fiction, novels, and short stories and analysed the style. Each year, we studied a Shakespeare play, committing much of it to memory, and performing scenes from it on April 23 in honor of Shakespeare's birthday... This gave us the impression that great poetry and fiction were written by and about people and places far distant from Australia... to us poetry was more like incantation than related to the rhythms of our own speech.³⁷

Speech and deportment were central aspects of this education. 'Speaking loudly, sitting in public in any fashion except bolt upright with a ramrod-straight back, were likewise sorts of behaviour which let down the school.'³⁸ Speech became part of deportment:

One's voice must be well modulated and purged of all ubiquitous Australian diphthongs. Teachers were tireless in pointing them out and stopping the class until the offender got the word right. Drills of 'how now brown cow' might have us all scarlet in the face choked [with] schoolgirl laughter, but they were serious matters for our instructors, ever on guard against the diphthongs that heralded cultural decline.³⁹

One of the aspects of speech was that it was regarded as a continuous source of moral instruction, for women in particular. The cultivation of voice signifies a transition from boyish rowdiness to mature women. The advice in women's journals points to the importance of voice, speech and culture in the development of femininity. Over several years, various advice columns were run in *Everylady's Journal*. The following advice was offered to 'Girls of the Sunny South' by Domina:

Maturity pardons the rough speech used in the rough games, the loud voice, the boyish, ugly stride, the general tone and bearing—pardons, condones these things in the youthful... The woman of maturity and charm... hears with critical ears the crude, direct language. And hearing, condemns; she listens to the loud mannish voice, and more carefully

modulates her own. She notes the masculine bearing, and resolves immediately that the price paid for prowess in rough games such as hockey, etc., is far in excess of values received.⁴⁰

It is important in youth to begin to correct and modify early boyish behaviour: 'Understand that the woman who speaks with an intonation delightful to hear, has, in her youth, watched her utterance, and carefully guarded it from crudity and a directness which the world...regards as deplorable!'⁴¹ The importance of correct speech was the subject of an address given by Helen Munro-Ferguson, the wife of the then Governor-General, to a girls' college in NSW. Inspiration and trust can be drawn

if you respect the language and endeavour to speak it with purity of diction and accent, avoiding stupid, imported slang and the habit of making one word, such as 'awful', do the work of half a dozen. It has been said that the quality of a man's brain can be gauged by the adjectives he uses, so remember that, if you happen to state that this or that is 'rotten', when you merely mean that it is 'tiresome' or that a person is 'decent' when you mean she is 'kind', an attentive hearer will take a depressing view of your mental powers, and perhaps be reminded of the fairy story and the beautiful Princess, from whose mouth a toad hopped every time she spoke.⁴²

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, such advice escalated and was a regular feature of the journal on conversation, voice and presentation of women's sounds. It was not only women, however, who were given advice. In 1925, advice was given to a male reader who needed to be better versed in the art of 'correct speaking':

I think you would find a course of elocution of great assistance to you. Careless pronunciation, which seems to be on the increase nowadays, would seem to be at the root of your difficulty. If an opportunity occurs to mentally pronounce a word of many syllables before uttering it aloud, by all means take advantage of it. Each syllable has its own value, and is placed in the word for a special purpose—to be pronounced distinctly.⁴³

Polite talking and conversation were identified as other aspects that were key to femininity. Good conversationalists

are born not made...To be an entertaining conversationalist, it is necessary to have a good, all-round knowledge of present-day affairs, to be conversant with the latest play or book and to know just sufficient about it to make an intelligent reference...It is little use memorizing a set conversation, as it might never be used; moreover, it is always well to adapt yourself to circumstances...Above all, be natural. People who

adopt an affected, mincing manner of speech look perfectly ridiculous when caught off their guard, and it is better by far to play the part of an intelligent listener than to indulge in a stream of wearisome small talk.⁴⁴

‘There is nothing wrong with Australian speech’

These debates were heightened even further in 1942, when the question of Australian speech aroused the interest of ABC listeners and was debated in the *ABC Weekly*. After the advent of radio, the debate about the correct way of speaking on the radio was a source of much discussion. As Ken Inglis has shown, the BBC radio voice was favoured on Australian radio for much of the 1930s and 1940s.⁴⁵

In 1942, A. G. Mitchell, an academic in the Department of English at the University of Sydney, who would later be first Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University, wrote two articles in the *ABC Weekly* that discussed the merits of Australian speech. He was strident in his view that an Australian voice should be broadcast on the ABC: ‘We should use an Australian speech, without apology and without any sense of a need for self-justification. There is *nothing* wrong with the Australian voice or speech. It is as acceptable, as pleasant, as *good English* as any speech to be heard anywhere in the English-speaking commonwealth.’⁴⁶

He opposed Australians trying to imitate the English manner, which would result in producing ‘a speech that was neither good Australian nor good English... We should give the pronunciation that is commonest in Australia, not slavishly imitate the English pronunciation’.⁴⁷ Judgements are never too far away from these discussions. ‘Few prejudices,’ observes Mitchell, ‘are more easily aroused than those that concern variations in speech.’ The conflation between speech and morality is drawn out in Mitchell’s article:

Question a man’s pronunciation of a word and you may touch him as nearly as if you doubted his moral integrity. Differences in political opinion are often more readily tolerated than differences in pronunciation. We are prepared to believe that a man who differs from us in politics may still be a quite reasonable person. But many of us go through life in the comfortable faith that any man who speaks differently from the way in which we speak must be a knave or a fop or a chump.⁴⁸

Mitchell argued for tolerance when confronted with differences of language and accent. ‘The tolerance we should feel towards people of other English-speaking countries we might reasonably claim for ourselves. Visiting critics, whatever their qualifications or interests, have a constant habit of condemning Australian speech, often by invitation from interviewers.’⁴⁹ To ‘read their opinions one would think that Australians had a monopoly of everything deplorable, careless

and corrupt in pronunciation'.⁵⁰ In defending Australian speech, Mitchell was questioning the practice of the ABC at that time and presenting a challenge to the policy of the national broadcaster, which was to promote a middle-class, educated English voice.

The *ABC Weekly* editorialised that it 'embraces the problem of whether broadcasting is to exert its proper influence over listeners by sounding natural and attractive to them or whether it is to be discounted by them as aloof and superior'.⁵¹ The magazine was definite that the voice that was broadcast should, however, be Australian. One of the 'depressing' tendencies about broadcasting was that there was a tendency to 'standardise' speech. 'We have suffered from the imitation of the so-called BBC voice in this country, just as the BBC has suffered from imitation in its own ranks.' It was important to resist the 'suburban fear' that somehow the concern about being considered "'uncultured" shall trick us into imitation of something which can never be anything but imitation and therefore of little value'.⁵² On another occasion, it was argued that the selection of broadcasters should be made on the basis of how well they spoke 'the Australian brand of English well', but 'not those who merely imitate something foreign to our environment'. They would then make the speech 'more pleasant to the ear'. A separation from the speech of 'ordinary' people 'merely alienates the people and sets up a natural resentment'.⁵³

Not all listeners agreed. Some argued that there were many Australian voices and accents. 'Another Australian' believed that 'most Australian voices have a nasal intonation which does not come through the microphone at all well, some words being quite unintelligible'. While it was important to have Australian broadcasters, they needed to be taught 'to speak the King's English'.⁵⁴ The Australian voice obviously had a number of variations. 'After listening to the Australian voices heard round me all day,' wrote one correspondent, 'I find the delivery and accents of the ABC announcers heard at night quite refreshing and pleasing to the ear.'⁵⁵

These articles generated considerable debate and discussion. Some argued that there was no such thing as an Australian accent, while others argued that if Australians insisted on speaking like they did, then 'we must and will do so, but we can hardly expect respect for a language bred of carelessness out of ignorance—still less to find it considered "as acceptable, as pleasant, as good English"'.⁵⁶ The slovenly nature of Australian speech remained a source of considerable concern throughout the 1940s. 'As a mother of five young hopefuls,' wrote 'Speech' from Toowoomba, 'I find there is a tendency to slur the vowels—a fault which shows up when they are asked to spell the word in question. This makes for slovenly speech and needs watching.'⁵⁷ Others were appalled at the suggestion that Australian speech was preferable to what was understood as standard English: 'National arrogance and conceit can go no further than to

claim that an untrained Australian voice is superior to that which results from study and hard work...Please do not degrade the cultural level of ABC announcers.'⁵⁸

Some saw it as a choice between buying 'a shoddy, second-class material product if it was within his financial possibility to buy a first quality article'. Why should the cultivation 'of the best mental or educational production of a language...be despised?'.⁵⁹

Prominent Australian commentators were asked to contribute to a debate about whether it was desirable to imitate the English or to develop and encourage a distinctly Australian accent. R. G. Menzies, a royalist and devotee of the British, did not object to an Australian speech, with 'local colour', but he detested the 'widespread slovenliness of speech'. 'I am all against encouraging carelessness and indifference on these matters. We will be none the less good Australians by being a little fastidious in our expression and using words as if we really knew what they meant.'⁶⁰ Vance Palmer, a radical nationalist, was more strident in his insistence that there be an Australian voice adopted and celebrated. It is beyond argument, he maintained,

that the standard we ought to aim at is good Australian speech, not any other kind. It may not have the richness of good Irish, the rhythm of good American, or the tonal variety of good southern English; but it has its own quality. Anyhow, it is native to us: that ought to clinch the matter. Any effort to substitute something else would lead to the enthronement...ringing emptily like a vessel with nothing inside.⁶¹

In an article entitled 'There is No Australian Accent', Dal Stivens identified various characteristics as quintessentially Australian in our speech. Citing a Sydney teacher of voice production, Stivens argues that much of the 'slovenliness in Australian speech is a psychological inhibition'. He argued that: 'The Australian hates to be conspicuous or "different". He has a horror of "side". Every teacher finds himself opposed, sooner or later, by what has been termed "a sturdy reluctance to vary from what is considered 'natural speech'".'

Historically, Australia had also been a ruggedly masculine country: conquering the bush meant there was 'a distrust of ideas and the things of the mind', although this was changing gradually. With urbanisation and increased communication, this has changed. Quoting the voice teacher, Stivens notes the way in which this teacher argues that the

so-called Australian accent is the product of a highly strung and nervous race. The Anglo-Saxon is the most repressed of all races. The Australian...[bears] the shame of his convict beginnings: he is subservient to England and to English customs. He had what the popular psychology calls an 'inferiority complex'.

This state was apparently reflected in speech: all pupils spoke with tight lips, did not open their mouths, were diffident and inclined to bluster.⁶²

Discussion about the sound of accents invariably led to considerations of the Australian national character. Reflections on what this constituted drew out various stereotypes and clichés, but the label of laziness and slovenly speech consistently informed such discussions. Debates about received English compared with the local variant and questions relating to the cultural politics of moral self-improvement are central themes in these debates. The most significant shift during the inter-war years was, however, the perception and promotion of a cultivated Australian accent as opposed to one that was considered rough and slovenly. By this time, it was agreed that the English accent should not simply be copied or replicated; the challenge ahead was how a respectable and distinctive Australian sound should be spoken.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Argus*, 11 December 1935, p. 21.
- ² Hancock, W. K. 1930, *Australia*, Jacaranda, London, p. 28.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- ⁶ Meredith, Mrs Charles 1973 [1844], *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales*, Penguin, Melbourne, p. 50.
- ⁷ Twopenny, Richard 1973 [1883], *Town life in Australia*, Penguin, Melbourne, p. 84.
- ⁸ Twain, Mark 1973 [1897], *Mark Twain in Australia and New Zealand*, Penguin, Melbourne, pp. 237–8.
- ⁹ 'The Red Page', *Bulletin*, 23 March 1901.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Argus*, 1 December 1938, p. 7.
- ¹² *Argus*, 3 December 1938; 6 December 1938, p. 33.
- ¹³ *Argus*, 3 November 1936, p. 8.
- ¹⁴ *Argus*, 9 November 1936, p. 8.
- ¹⁵ *Argus*, 29 October 1936, p. 10.
- ¹⁶ *Argus*, 21 December 1936, p. 3.
- ¹⁷ *Argus*, 12 May 1937, p. 11.
- ¹⁸ Chakrabarty, Dipesh 2000, *Provincializing Europe: Post-Colonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp. 180–213.
- ¹⁹ Green, James 1926, 'The Australian Accent', *Bulletin*, 14 October 1926, pp. 3–4.
- ²⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 December 1933, p. 6.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Argus*, 10 December 1937, p. 10.
- ²³ Baeyertz, C. N. c.1935, *Correct English, Public Speaking, Elocution, Voice Production*, C. N. Baeyertz Institute, Sydney, NSW.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- ²⁷ *Argus*, 30 October 1936, p. 10.
- ²⁸ Hasluck, Alice 1925, *Elocution and Gesture*, Methuen & Co., London, p. viii.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

- ³⁰ Rich, Kathleen 1932, *The Art of Speech: A Handbook of Elocution*, London, p. xii.
- ³¹ MacLure, Victor 1928, *The Practical Elocution Book*, London, Bombay, Sydney, p. 19.
- ³² Ibid., p. 19.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 20.
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