

BROADCASTING AND SPOKEN ENGLISH

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AMONG the discontents and grievances, real and imaginary, which help to fill the correspondence columns of newspapers, 'B.B.C. English' is a veteran. Those who complain usually make an assumption and a statement. They assume the existence of a type of spoken English with definable characteristics to which the term 'B.B.C. English' may be assigned. They state that this is an undesirable type of English and frequently, explicitly or implicitly, compare it unfavourably with their own. Critics range from the highly educated to the lunatic fringe. From whatever section of society they derive, they share strong feelings, often express themselves with vehement indignation, and accuse the B.B.C. of attempting to force millions of listeners into the strait-jacket of an accent which is in some way decadent. The adjectives used to describe it sometimes express a relation between the writer's education, social position or home county and those of an imaginary person, the audible embodiment of the B.B.C.: 'superior', 'lah-di-dah', 'snobbish', 'slipshod', 'Mayfair', 'Cockney', 'Oxford', 'drawling', are examples of the words used to relieve real irritation. In an age when the niceties of language, spoken and written, command so little appreciation, so much emotion may seem surprising. I believe it is both natural and, in some degree, desirable. But I should not like to say why without examining the basic assumption that there is an accent called 'B.B.C. English'.

Who speaks it? The B.B.C. is an instrument for making audible whatever it considers interesting, entertaining or in any way valuable or useful to those who listen. It is no more responsible for the accents of those whom it places before a microphone than it is for their views, except when it employs them as spokesmen. Freedom of speech includes a freedom of accent. If I choose to pronounce the word 'tea' in the eighteenth-century manner, rhyming with 'bay', nobody can stop me. But the price of my eccentricity is that I shall probably not be understood and that I shall go thirsty until I bring my pronunciation into line with modern usage or resort to spelling. And this is the crux. The

B.B.C. employs spokesmen whose business is to make known the details of the day's programmes, to introduce them appropriately and to read news bulletins. For the speech of its announcers the B.B.C. must take responsibility, and their first duty is to be easily intelligible to the audience to which they are employed to speak. Are these the people who speak 'B.B.C. English'? A brief excursion round the domestic wavelengths gives the answer 'No'. The B.B.C. is not merely metropolitan: it has stations at Bristol, Cardiff, Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Belfast whose function is to reflect the culture of their own countries or areas. The announcers at these stations speak the educated English of their environment which may or may not be the same as that of their London colleagues. The Cardiff staff is bilingual and its announcers speak the English of educated Welshmen who have not lost the habit of their own tongue. It is not identical with the London version: the differences may be small but they are detectable. It cannot be said that 'B.B.C. English' is spoken by all announcers. Who speaks it?

The answer is clear. The London newsreaders are the culprits. It is their duty to read news so that it may be easily understood in Plymouth or Kings Lynn, Cardigan or Fort William. And they share a type of English which has certain recognisable characteristics. The B.B.C. did not invent it and does not teach it to aspiring announcers. It is simply a well-articulated educated southern accent, an approximation to the Received Standard which Wyld analysed in his *History of Modern Colloquial English*. The substance of the critics' complaint is usually either that this accent is unsuitable for its purpose or that it is not true Received Standard but a corrupted version.

It is difficult to see what other accent the B.B.C. could have chosen for its London newsreaders. The two requirements are that the selected accent should be easily intelligible over the whole country and that it should not identify the reader too closely with any particular locality. An examination of the speech of any of the present newsreaders would, in my view, reveal a high degree of intelligibility because they speak an accent in which the different sounds of our language are clearly differentiated. This is the factor on which intelligibility primarily depends. And it is an accent which you may hear almost anywhere in the country.

There are, however, various forms of educated southern

English, ranging from what may be called Common Room High Pedantic to Mayfair Mumble. These are not characterised by a high degree of intelligibility. What I call Mayfair Mumble distorts the vowels of our language almost past recognition: there is no distinction between 'head' and 'had', between 'tar' and 'tower', between 'foam' and 'firm'. Differences between the vowel sounds tend to disappear and the result is a version of English which seems to millions of people affected and irritating. There is always a danger that influences from one of these southern variants will affect a wide group of educated speakers and that a loss of intelligibility may result. In so far as these influences affect intelligibility, newsreaders must resist them, and in particular they must beware of any deterioration in their standards of vowel articulation. I cannot see much cause for anxiety at the moment, but the influence of broadcasting upon the spoken language is such that continual vigilance, from within and without, is a social duty.

For that reason we should welcome the evidence of interest and awareness which criticism of 'B.B.C. English' indicates. However prejudiced or ill-formed it may be, it helps to draw attention to one of the facts of life, that an organisation which has the monopoly of the air has a great responsibility for the speech of its spokesmen. Public comment can help the B.B.C. to maintain the very high standards which it has set itself.

A criticism frequently made of the B.B.C. is that it is the principal agent of the elimination of our traditional dialects. I believe this view to be understandable but mistaken. As far as I can see, it is no part of the B.B.C.'s policy, directly or indirectly, to suggest that Britain would be a better place if we all talked alike. But unquestionably it exercises an influence which tends to make us do so. What is often forgotten is that it is only the most obvious of those influences. Any extension of man's power to travel, whether actually, by train, car or aeroplane, or vicariously, by telephone, radio, cinema, or television, tends more and more to undermine the highly localised cultures which developed in ages when, for the ordinary man, travel was impossible, and from which our dialects, those private languages of the small group, stem. The process has been going on since time began, but it is in the last century that inventions have particularly accelerated its movement. The B.B.C. is one of the agents of this acceleration, but it cannot be held formally responsible for it. In fact, its

regional policy aims to foster and assist those local activities and interests which are the salient features of regional cultures. In this field it has been active and vigorous, perhaps nowhere more so than in Wales. I have the impression that I hear Welsh spoken in the towns and villages of Wales even more than I did before the war. There is certainly no evidence of any decline, and for this entirely healthy state of affairs the B.B.C. is entitled to a considerable share of commendation. It is true that this is a national and not a regional culture, and that it is therefore less vulnerable to outside influences than one whose boundaries and components are not so clearly defined. Nevertheless, that so many people should choose of their own free will to speak two languages fluently is evidence, I suggest, of a strong and sensible civilisation, and the B.B.C.'s policy has contributed to its welfare.

Personally I take the view that the case for the B.B.C. monopoly is overwhelming, and that view has been shared, up to the present time, by the majority of our representatives at Westminster. The fact of monopoly imposes the most serious responsibilities upon the B.B.C., but it also imposes them upon us who, through our representatives, are responsible for its existence. It is our duty, just as it is the duty of the B.B.C., to guard those values, those standards which are central in our civilisation. And among those standards we must regard a responsibility towards the spoken language. I repeat, any criticism on this score, however ill-informed, however biased, is better than none. An apathetic acquiescence would mark a feeble and supine attitude towards an activity which affects us all. It should be one of the aims of education to make such criticism better informed.