COMMENT

Editorial

A few weeks ago, an Australian academic working at a British university told one of the editors of this journal about attending a meeting on collaborative links between his UK employer and an institution in his home town of Melbourne, Australia. It was a good meeting, he said, in all respects but one: "Everyone kept talking about /ˈmɛlbɔːn/ all the time. It's not /ˈmɛlbɔːn/, it's /ˈmɛlbən/! By the end it was really starting to drive me mad. I wanted to stand up and say 'Look, guys, can we get the pronunciation right, here?' But of course I didn't – I just sat there, cringing every time they said /ˈmɛlbɔːn/."

No doubt many readers of *English Today* will be able to tell similar tales of hearing the names of towns and cities in their home country being mispronounced by native speakers of other varieties of English. But is it actually correct to refer to these as 'mispronunciations'? On the one hand, it would seem entirely reasonable for the Australian academic to regard their pronunciation of an Australian city as the definitive one. At the same time, however, it could be noted that the morpheme *bourne* is also found in many British place names (e.g. Bournemouth, Eastbourne), where it is often – and especially in the south of England - pronounced /bɔːn/. Etymologically, *bourne* originates in Old English, where it means 'brook', 'stream', 'small river', this being cognate with the Old Norse word for 'spring' or 'well', *brunnr*. While these toponymic observations do not in any way trump the Australian academic's view regarding the correct pronunciation of Melbourne, it is not difficult to imagine a British person arguing – not unreasonably – that /ˈmɛlbɔːn/ is the correct pronunciation of the place name 'Melbourne' in *British* English, irrespective of whether the speaker is referring to the capital of the Australian state of Victoria or to the town of the same name in Derbyshire, England (where, somewhat confusingly, some local dialect speakers do also use /bən/). But would our imaginary British person be equally happy to allow the same arguments to apply when a speaker of American English refers to both Birmingham, Alabama and Birmingham, England as /ˈbɜːrmɪŋhæm/?

There is of course no quick and easy way of resolving such questions. What is clear, however, is that when a language is as geographically widespread as English is, we should not be surprised to find that almost any aspect of it may be subject to contestation. Even something as seemingly unproblematic as the pronunciation of place names turns out on closer inspection to have a complicated cultural politics attached.

This issue of *English Today* contains several articles on a vocabulary theme: Chen and Cheng chart a word's slow progression towards dictionary acceptance; Diez-Arroyo documents the presence of English words in Spanish fashion writing, and Kim the incorporation of English into Korean lexis; Donlan uses the internet to explore some characteristic Australian colloquialisms; and a review by Wales is of a book on topographical and nature-related words. Another theme in this issue is that of English on the world stage: in the third of her series on British and American English, Murphy addresses superficial similarities and real differences between the varieties; Schneider's article concerns pragmatic English communication across cultures; Blommaert considers the importance of teaching an English that promotes smooth social contact; and Brunelière's review is of a book exploring attitudes to and use of English in multilingual Switzerland. Davidson's article addresses English /r/, following on from Bulley's discussion of this in *ET* issue 30.4. Mulvey embarks on an historical exploration of English pronunciation. And Vresiendorp provides what we expect to be the penultimate contribution from the Leiden prescriptivism project, focussing on efforts internet users make to 'correct' misuse of English.

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The editors

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