

SPELLING PRONUNCIATIONS

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One of the incidental functions of my daily routine is to answer complaints from listeners about the language that goes over the air, especially, of course, that spoken or written by the people employed by the SABC. It's a generalization, but a safe generalization, that the worst offences against English are committed not by the employees of the Corporation itself but by people interviewed, politicians, sports administrators, business 'executives' and the like, over whom we have no linguistic control at all. After seventeen years I'm by no means happy about broadcast English in this country; or in Britain for that matter; and I never shall be; but whether you've noticed it or not, it is rather better than it was, say, ten years ago. At least those most apt to perpetrate offences have become slightly (or in the vogue word, 'marginally') more aware, or less unaware, of the said offences.

One sign at least of improvement is that so many of the complaints from listeners are themselves mistaken. When there is a just complaint I am the first to agree with it and support it; but there are many, sometimes the majority, that have been merely sucked out of the writer's thumb with no objective justification. It's long since ceased to surprise me that most people naturally assume that the pronunciation of a word that they've been accustomed to use *must* be the right one, and that any other *must* be wrong.

A gentleman recently wrote to complain about the way our announcers pronounce the word 'again'. Six of them were cited by name as saying, 'Here are the news headlines *agen*' (instead of 'agayn' to rhyme with 'plain'). However, as the Henry Higgins of

Southern Transvaal, I have news for our complainant: He is wrong, and we are right, as he could have discovered for himself if he had looked up a dictionary. Not only oral tradition but the Shorter Oxford is quite happy with 'agen', which is of course the 'correct' pronunciation, 'agayn' being a mere would-be genteel affectation; and the rain in Spain has nothing whatever to do with it.

'Agayn' is in fact a member of a large class of what are called 'spelling pronunciations': that is, words whose traditional pronunciations have become corrupted by the sight of their written form. It's a process that's always (like so much of modern English) been far more noticeable in America, where it's long been an endemic disease. (Might I say an endemic pandemic?) There it's been going on for hundreds of years; and it's worth considering in the local South African 'context' too.

A few years ago an American airline started 'luxury' flights between New York and Miami, which they called 'The Golden Falcon'. More recently Ford Motors built a new 'compact' car, which they likewise called 'The Falcon'. Or rather, they didn't. In the United States, *falcon* is essentially a book-word known only to ornithologists; there isn't, and never was, the ancient sport of falconry, or the breed of seigniorial servants known as *falconers* that gave us the not uncommon proper name. So far as that goes, the Americans literally don't know a hawk from a handsaw. Even though all the American dictionaries give the time-honoured pronunciation of /'fɔ:k n/ quite clearly, unambiguously and unanimously, it wouldn't do. The publicity departments of both these concerns *ordered* their radio and television announcers to say /'fɔ:k n/ presumably on the analogy of 'balcony' and 'talcum powder.' So that those who listen, whether willingly or not, to the commercials will from now on hear nothing but /'fɔ:k n/. When a few people asked how they could justify this, the reply was that even although the dictionaries gave another pronunciation, their (that is, the commercial boys') pronunciation was more familiar to Americans in general. In other words, they appealed to popular usage after they themselves had *made* it popular usage. It's like corrupting a teenage girl, then justifying it by saying that she's no longer a virgin; or like the liberated youngster who murdered both his parents, then threw himself on the mercy of the court on the grounds that he was an orphan.

We've encountered the same phenomenon in this country, with the ridiculous word, or rather non-word, 'prooven' instead of 'proved'. Again, we have the commercials, many of American origin, to thank for that.

But this practice, that combines ignorance and pedantry in equal

proportions, has long been a characteristic of American speech - as Dickens makes abundantly clear in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, for which many Americans have never forgiven him. Public speakers in America, politicians, and clergymen of all denominations, tend almost literally to spell out their messages to the audience, as if they needed the reinforcement of the visual written word to grasp what's being said. And indeed, in a country full of immigrants to whom English is a language acquired only secondarily, whose knowledge may vary from fair competence to bare literacy, it may well be necessary, hence the ponderously laboured 'ays' and 'thees' of all American oratory, or even radio reports, and the tiresome final '-ors' in words like *director* or *administrator*. But this treatment of language has an even deeper root: the American schoolmistress, or schoolmarm, as she is widely known as. The language of the United States has been under her thumb for centuries now, just as so much else of the culture is dominated by more opinionated than well-informed women. The male side of American life is represented by some such allegorical figure as an unwashed, unshaven backwoodsman ejecting tobacco-juice into a spittoon, with language to match. It was the task of the schoolmistress to counteract the influence of such fathers, uncles and brothers. But where was the poor woman to get *her* culture, *her* gentility, *her* standards of correctness? The only oral tradition was the sort that I've hinted at, and that Dickens describes in such horrified and fascinated detail. All she had to go on was the written word, and in that she was, and is, a fundamentalist; interpreting it over-literally, au pied de la lettre. So figure became figure, picture became picture, and creature became creature. Likewise syllables that have long been dropped in English were reinstated: *every*, *several*, *chocolate*, *interested*, *vegetable*, *extra-ordinary*, *necessarily*, *medicine*.

Of course, this phenomenon isn't and wasn't confined entirely to American English. There have been outbreaks of pedantry that have corrupted both the spelling and the pronunciation of British English. For example, a word like 'fault' is bad in both its written and its spoken form. It came into the language, via Norman French, as *faute*, without the *l*; and for centuries it was pronounced *faut*; still is in Scotland. But some Holofernes decided that it was incorrect without the *l*; so that we now both write and pronounce it *fault*. In the same way the word *debt* acquired its *b*, which, however, we quite correctly ignore in speech. *Perfect* and *verdict* hadn't got the *c* in them in Middle English; they were pedantically inserted by pedants. The nonsensical spelling *victuals* for *vittles* has probably driven what used to be a good and common word right out of the language altogether. Even the word *language* itself is a pedantic corruption of *langage*, without the *u*. The words that are now pronounced *join*, *point*, and *boil* were until quite recently pronounced *jine*, *pint* and

bile, and still are in some parts. Pope, in the *Essay on Man*, writes:

Then say not Man's imperfect, Heav'n in fault;
Say rather, Man's as perfect as he ought:
and
...Middle natures, how they long to join,
Yet never pass the insuperable line!
and
This light and darkness in our chaos join'd,
What shall divide? The God within the mind.

These are *perfect* rhymes, not loose rhymes. The process still continues. The body that rules our comings and goings used to be the govern-ment; but now it's universally the government. We used to wear *clo's*, but now one hears 'clothes' everywhere; and even the Shorter Oxford gives it. A couple of generations ago nobody talked about the Arctic and the Antarctic - it was the Artic, the Antarctic; correctly too, for that was how the word was spelt and pronounced when we first acquired it from French. These influences, based on too little rather than too much knowledge, are irritating to anybody brought up in a sound, living oral tradition.

Anyway, neither in Britain nor South Africa have things got to the absurd lengths that they've got to in America; though you needn't be too complacent. South Africans are already talking about *skedules* and *vay-cations*. You can bet your boots that anybody accosted at random won't be able to pronounce *schism*; they'll say either 'shism' or 'skism'. And have you noticed that nobody, but *nobody*, can spell the woman's name Sibyl any more?

Then therè's this ludicrous American habit of pseudo-Spanish pronunciations for Don Quixote and Don Juan, as if Cervantes had been discovered and translated only yesterday. Do they form an adjective kee-hotic? And do they suppose that Byron called his poem Don Khwaan? The questions are rhetorical. And all those English placenames like Chatham and Nottingham and Norwich and Harwich so copiously transferred across the Atlantic, to be recreated as Chat-ham and Notting-ham and Nor-wich and Har-wich and Green-wich and what not. I kid you not. But even in this country you can already hear fore-head for forehead, *mashinations* for machinations, and *ayt* for ate. You may not yet have got to the pitiful state of American pronunciation, in which it's become impossible to distinguish between parity and parody, futile and feudal, winter and winner. But don't be too complacent. You are subject to the same influences, you are already yielding to them whether you know it or not; and the American-type schoolmistress is at large amongst you. You may not yet be saying 'agayn'; but it's very possible that your children will.