

STANDARDS

by Dudley Knight

Every six months or so, some post or other on VASTAVOX, the internet discussion list for the Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA), sets off a brief flurry of comments on the ever-vexing issue of standards in speech training for actors. What are the virtues or liabilities in the dominant accent pattern—Good American Speech—that has been taught to generations of American actors? Do we need any single accent pattern for classical performance onstage? If so, what? If not, how does a teacher construct a voice and speech curriculum that avoids a rigidly defined pattern, yet still provides speech and “dialect”¹ students the skills that they need to possess to work in a variety of professional environments? Are the standards that a speech teacher might apply to actor training also applicable to speech training with professional voice users who are not theatre or film performers?

The focus of this essay will be on the last two questions. I shall assert that if we use the word “standard” to mean a qualitative criterion, the only standard that we can apply generally to every aspect of speech or accent training is that of intelligibility, even though there are always many other possibly desirable characteristics which might apply to specific speech tasks in differing contexts. Achieving a level of consistent intelligibility across accent groups will, I suggest, necessarily involve a speaker’s ability to manipulate easily (and on stage, often reflexively) the degree of phonological detail appropriate to the task. The requirements for development of these skills in theatrical and non-theatrical contexts may differ considerably, but the issue of “accent reduction” ideology as taught to speakers outside is useful in giving perspective to the requirements for stage speech.

Parts of this essay are based more on opinion derived from personal experience than on scholarship. I make no apology for this. Most of the theatre voice teacher’s research library resides in the cumulative experience of the individual shared with colleagues through thousands of interactions with students and with other theatre professionals. As I shall note more than once, there is little if any corroboration of this kind of teaching experience through controlled statistical studies. In many speech matters, the results of research studies might be extremely useful to the theatre artist; in many more, they would be quite irrelevant, perhaps even destructive to work that is delicate and intuitive.

¹ I place “dialects” in quotes because I prefer to observe the distinction generally used in linguistics between “accent,” the sound pattern in a shared speech group, and “dialect,” the more inclusive term which also contains lexical and grammatical components of speech.

RP: The Big Standard

"An English Pronouncing Dictionary," by the renowned British phonetician Daniel Jones, has gone through a procession of revisions and reprints since its appearance in print in England in 1916. Today, nearly a century after publication, it remains an indispensable reference for language historians, dialecticians, and theatre dialect directors. But in the editor's preface and the author's introduction to the first revised edition (1924) of "An English Pronouncing Dictionary" a very civilized but substantial disagreement is aired between Jones, the author, and his Modern Language series editor, Walter Ripman. Ripman expresses a strong belief that the pattern of English pronunciation found in Jones's book should be recognized as the pronunciation standard for all speakers of the language.² Daniel Jones disagrees, emphatically. While scholars have often cited his statements, he is rarely quoted at length on the subject. His argument is revealing in several ways:

In what follows I call it "Received Pronunciation" (abbreviation RP), for want of a better term. I wish it to be clearly understood, however, that RP means merely "widely understood pronunciation," and that I do not hold it up as a standard which everyone is recommended to adopt....

The fact that RP is easily *understood* almost everywhere in the English-speaking world does not mean that it is *used* by a majority of English-speaking people. On the contrary, it is used by a rather small minority. There are innumerable other ways of pronouncing English in existence, and I do not claim that RP is intrinsically "better" or more "beautiful" than any other form of pronunciation. I have recorded it because it happens to be the only type of English pronunciation about which I am able to obtain full and accurate information.

I wish to state that I have no intention of becoming either a reformer of pronunciation or a judge who decides what pronunciations are "good" and what are "bad." The proper function of a phonetician is to observe and record accurately, to be, in fact, a living phonograph. I would add that I am not one of those who believe in the feasibility of imposing one particular form of pronunciation on the English-speaking world. If the public wants a standard pronunciation, I believe that a standard will evolve itself without any interference by phoneticians. If there are any who do not share this view, it must be left to them to undertake the invidious task of deciding what is to be approved and what is to be condemned. This book will provide them with a small fraction of the materials they will require as a basis to work upon. (Jones, ix)

Proponents of the theatrical accent pattern "Good American Speech," for whom Jones has long been a hero, obviously will find little comfort in these words.

Opponents of "Good American Speech" have a problem, too, but it is a little more complex. Some contemporary sociolinguists have accused Jones of being rather self-justifying in the passage just quoted (though his critics seem never to quote it in full), and with some reason. After all, in hindsight we know that "An English Pronouncing Dictionary" was seized upon by the Walter Ripmans of British language education and that almost immediately after its publication the

² "There are many who think that for the purposes of social intercourse and of various kinds of public speaking (such as the pulpit and the stage), we require a 'standard speech' and that, when a language is spread as widely over the world as ours is, a generally recognized form of speech is no less desirable than a common literary language." (Ripman, in Editor's Preface to Jones, v)

dictionary became an important tool in a very conscious effort to maintain RP as an accent standard for English pronunciation within England itself, and—in various ways—throughout the English-speaking world. Further, Jones acknowledges that his dictionary describes an accent pattern that is far more class-based than geographically-defined. And it is in this Revised Edition that Jones first uses the initials RP (for Received Pronunciation) to denote the pattern.³ RP has remained its title to this day.

So, the question: is Daniel Jones, in denying that he is promoting a “standard pronunciation,” merely trying to let himself off the hook?

Possibly

In previous writings, Jones had used the term “standard” freely. By the time the Revised Edition of “An English Pronouncing Dictionary” appeared eight years after its initial publication, Jones’s book had aroused impassioned opposition to the establishment of RP as a “standard,” not only by opponents of the concept of a “standard,” but also by such proponents of a “Northern Standard” of pronunciation as the former poet-laureate, Robert Bridges.⁴ The target of these attacks was not Walter Ripman, but Daniel Jones. So he may have been feeling defensive when he first revised his Introduction. And it was at approximately this time in the mid-1920’s that Jones became a prominent member of a panel of speech experts (including George Bernard Shaw) who were charged with setting pronunciation standards for the BBC, an obvious exercise in speech prescription and proscription which turned out to have a more lasting effect on the promulgation of RP as a national pronunciation standard than even Jones’s dictionary.

Or possibly not

If we consider the quoted passage in itself, Daniel Jones very explicitly and emphatically rejects one of the chief arguments used by the proponents of RP as a standard, the notion that the sounds of RP are naturally more pleasing to the ear than those of other English accents. In the revised edition he also takes pains to remove the gender-specific frame of reference for RP that he had used in the first edition.⁵ And finally, Jones rejects with some passion the idea that it is even possible to establish a “standard” for the pronunciation of the English language by prescriptive means. In so doing, Jones is echoing the sentiments of his mentor Henry Sweet, who had codified the system of phonetic transcription (so-called Broad Romic) that still forms the basis of today’s International Phonetic Alphabet, but who categorically rejected the idea of a standard for English speech. By the time Jones has finished those three assertions, there is not much for adherents of a “standard” to cling onto, other than the assertion that RP is “widely understood.”

³ In the first edition, Jones called the pattern PSP, Public School Pronunciation.

⁴ It is interesting to note that these partisans of Northern Standard often accused RP’s Southern Standard of lacking clarity of articulation; it was the presumed status of RP as a “widely understood pronunciation” that formed the chief argument for its becoming a “standard.”

⁵ Compare “The pronunciation used in this book is that most usually heard in everyday speech in the families of Southern English persons whose men-folk have been educated at the great public boarding-schools” (1917) with “The pronunciation represented in this book is that most usually heard in everyday speech in the families of Southern English persons who have been educated at the great public boarding-schools.” (1924) Jones’s critics always quote the first version without acknowledging the second.

Historiographer Tony Crowley states flatly that Daniel Jones’s “conscious intentions are not important” (Crowley 174) since they are so at variance with the actual effect of “An English Pronouncing Dictionary” on speech education and speech ideology in England. Within the context of his argument Crowley is right, and there is a substantial cautionary message for accent specialists in the alacrity with which linguistic description can harden into prescription and proscription. Pronouncing dictionaries by nature lend themselves to this speedy transformation because they freeze accent in time while in reality the language goes marching on, ever changing. Like the brand-new car that depreciates in value as we drive it off the sales lot, any accent dictionary emerges from the printer as an instant historical record, no longer a wholly accurate description of contemporary use. It may be very valuable still, but its value, even if only slightly, is compromised.⁶

For those of us who teach speech and accent skills in theatre, reacquainting ourselves with Jones’s own personal ideology can be instructive however. The disparity between intention and effect is—if nothing else—a valuable warning to us all to be mindful always whether what we think we are teaching is what we actually are teaching. Unexamined assumptions about our work can follow us doggedly. Rhetoric may not always match practice. Just one case in point: several pupils and colleagues of Edith Warman Skinner, whose influence kept the “Good American Speech” accent pattern fixed as the standard for theatre speech training in the USA, have assured me that Skinner became very accepting of regional accent variation in her pupils during her later years, when she was teaching at the Juilliard School. I have no reason to doubt this. But during those very same years, on the testimony of other students of hers, Skinner was still beginning workshops in the following manner: she would have each student in her class announce his or her name, the usual get-acquainted ritual; she would then correct every person’s pronunciation to the Good American Speech model. Finally she would announce to the group (as quoted to me by a former student at A.C.T.⁷) “You see? If you can’t even pronounce your own names correctly, how do you expect to be able to act Shakespeare?”

Assuming both these stories were factual, it would suggest that Skinner was allowing a certain amount of (as we used to say in the old days) “cognitive dissonance” into her practice, the maintenance in the same cognitive structure of two or more concepts which are contradictory and incompatible. I would suggest that Skinner was not alone in that plight, nor are we exempt today. None of us are immune from allowing remnants of our own archaic⁸ teaching ideologies to slip stealthily into our current work and often to coexist in our practice with newer and wholly incompatible methods. If we fail to reexamine periodically, and with rigor, the basic assumptions on which our teaching is founded (not just the practical details and techniques) we may—like Daniel Jones—be promoting unconsciously practices that run directly counter to our own best intentions.

⁶ Jones was not the only dictionary author to suffer from this difficulty. During the 1920’s in the United States John Kenyon was vigorously attacked by the prescriptive speech teachers who followed the ideology of William Tilly (and the elocutionists of earlier decades) because Kenyon had the temerity to use an actual American accent (his own Ohio accent) as the basis for his speech textbook “American Pronunciation.” Ironically he is today attacked by ideologues at the opposite end of the political spectrum, who accuse him of elevating the status of “Inland Northern” as a standard accent pattern (sometimes mis-termed General American), the better to stigmatize all other American accents. Like Jones, Kenyon apparently knew not what he wrought.

⁷ The American Conservatory Theatre, in San Francisco.

⁸ And I mean archaic according to each teacher’s own criteria. Older pedagogy is not, by definition, of lesser value than new (and the same applies to older pedagogues, I sincerely hope); revolutionary claims in the world of ideas merit as much skepticism as any other way of thinking.

Fortunately the times themselves may help to act as a corrective. These are truly exciting years in which to be working in the fields of voice, speech, dialect, and text training for actors. Both in academe and in professional theatre, the opportunities for artistic expression, productive research, and even *mirabile dictu* a living wage, have never been greater for voice and speech teachers. Voice as art is learning from and instructing voice as science. Methodologies of voice production training move toward fruitful interactions with other approaches without sinking (usually) into a homogenized mush. Within the sub-specialties of speech and accent training, the reestablishment of interdisciplinary links into linguistics, psychology, critical theory, acoustic voice analysis, and speech pathology, means that accent specialists are able to gain access to far more information and theoretical context than used to be the case. The revolution in information technology, despite its negative potential for turning direct human vocal communication into a quaint remnant of that bygone century, the twentieth, still has made it possible for speech/dialect teachers to share information and archival material in ways that were simply unavailable before. Actors are beginning to learn to use a richer palette of phonetic sounds: the MFA actor who doesn't know his [ʃ] “esh” from his [æ] “ash,”⁹ is becoming, if not rare, at least less common.

We are in a period of change. The old paradigms are being challenged and long-held assumptions are being questioned.

But with what result?

Standard speech for actors and real people

Actors *are* real people, of course, and many of the concerns about speech standards in the general population are concerns for actors too. The actor who is told that she has been pronouncing her own name wrong all these years is apt to feel deeply wounded. The Alabama actor who is told that he had better lose his deep southern accent in “real life” if he ever wants to work as an actor may start to weigh working as an actor against giving up his sense of personal identity. As actors we feel the magnetism of becoming someone else, but as people we know the intimate importance of the vocal and physical manifestation of who we are, a unique vocal identity we have spent our whole lives evolving. We do not want to be required to compromise the latter to achieve the former.

So the questions start pouring out from actors about the need for pronunciation standards, both in life and in art.

The Real World

Let us deal with the easier arena, real life, first. Historically dialectologists within the field of linguistics have been unalterably opposed to the imposition of any standard of speech, either in

⁹ (Or the more phonetically-challenged actor who doesn't know his [æ] from a hole in the ground.) This is the nomenclature used commonly by linguistic phoneticians as compiled by Ladusaw and Pullum in their *Phonetic Symbol Guide* (1986). They have been adopted in the new “Handbook of the International Phonetic Association” (1999) The term “ash” (“aesc” in Old English) has been in use for over a thousand years. Speech teachers for theatre, or their students, often invent their own descriptive names for IPA symbols, some of them very colorful. For a while, my students called the [æ] the “swimming 8.”

accent or in the larger lexical and semantic context of dialect study. This conceptual split between descriptive and prescriptive analysis of language formed the rift between linguists and speech teachers that developed during the 1920’s in the United States, a rift that may be starting to mend, though uneasily.

The relationship between dialectology and theatrical accent study is undergoing considerable change; theatre accent coaches have much to learn from the data that dialect scholars develop, and dialectologists could learn much about accuracy of pattern formation from theatre accent coaches. But as of today dialectologists probably would not object to my saying that, with a few exceptions, they seem not particularly interested in the theatrical application of their studies. The current attitude among dialectologists toward any preferred speech standard is predictably negative. Moreover, dialectologists are generally concerned primarily with the larger structures of dialect—vocabulary, use of idiom, and grammatical structure—and far less with the purely phonological and intonation features of accent.

Accent as oppression

The one place in which dialectology today finds itself in direct conflict with speech teaching is in the area often called by its practitioners “accent reduction.” Many theatre speech teachers and accent coaches also work with non-theatrical clients in accent modification, so it is worth exploring briefly the views of some of our colleagues in dialectology in this respect. After describing as “disturbing and pathetic” the work of one “accent-reduction” specialist, dialectologist Timothy Frazer says of another:

I get the same feeling watching a woman in *American Tongues* throw herself on the mercy of yet another speech therapist in order to rid herself of a Brooklyn accent. There is a sense of moral superiority in the work of these speech therapists, who teach Inland Northern (acronymed SWINE by Raven McDavid, for Standard White Inland Northern English) as something safely sanitized, a measure against which everything else is deviant. (Frazer, 3)

Rosina Lippi-Green, in her book “English with an Accent,” gives a much more extensive and even-tempered ideological critique of “accent-reduction” teaching, from which I quote only a very small sample. Lippi-Green’s study focuses specifically on accent bias in America, considered apart from bias about grammatical or lexical use in dialect. As with Frazer, the principal assertion, repeated throughout Lippi-Green’s book, is that people who teach clients how to modify accent patterns are working in the service of an oppressive, biased, and hegemonic campaign by a power elite in America—all of whom speak an ill-defined “General American,”—to stigmatize the accents of Southerners, Hispanics, African-Americans, and Asians by enforcing an arbitrary standard of pronunciation. Practitioners of “accent reduction” are defined as “individuals who own their own businesses” as distinct from speech pathologists, who are trained “professionals” addressing legitimate issues of vocal pathology. Lippi-Green continues:

In any city of average size, there will be a few people who have hung out a shingle and sought clients with the claim that they can teach them to lose one accent and acquire another: some may be speech pathologists; others are not. There is no regulation or licensing for such businesses, in the same way that an individual can claim to have developed a miracle diet and charge money for it. Professionals¹⁰

¹⁰ Presumably speech pathologists.

who are honest with themselves and their clients may still have a legitimate service to offer people who have acquired English as a second language and who would like to come *closer* to a native pronunciation of US English. Actors often need to learn how to simulate another accent, in a contrived setting and for short periods of time. These are not unreasonable goals, and they are often pursued by well-meaning individuals. (Lippi-Green 140)

Beyond offering the mild tit-for-tat rebuttal that there is no state licensing for sociolinguists either, this attack is probably disturbing to those of us with private accent clients, the most disturbing aspect being that there is a good deal of truth in it. It seems undeniable that the embedded ideology of speech teaching would follow the flow of power and privilege in any society, even in a country like ours in which political rhetoric often tries to deny that such hierarchical structures exist. But although Lippi-Green's research is extensive and sometimes impressive, it has some obvious methodological problems that render her overall conclusions less than persuasive.

Firstly, her evidence of accent bias is almost entirely anecdotal and almost none of it emanates from controlled studies. So while she is able to present a lot of stories—some of them horrendous—about accent bias against her list of stigmatized groups, the presumptive seriousness of the problem of media-fed accent bias is hugely inflated by the fact that she cites none of the abundant evidence of accent bias flowing in directions that do not fit her ideologically preferred patterns. Real life, even on TV, is not so neat. If America sees the televised image of Jeff Foxworthy or Gomer Pyle (in cable reruns), there are also Frazier and Niles Crane in primetime on NBC. If there is a history of mocking supposedly "dumb Southerners" in standup comedy (since the sixties there has existed a taboo against whites mocking African-American accents in this setting), think what great comic mileage Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Chris Rock have gotten out of mocking Northern white accents. "Waterboy" was a hit a few years ago on the big screen, but so was "Fargo." If Southerners have to fight negative accent stereotypes in order to climb to positions of power and responsibility, bear in mind that for eight years Bill Clinton has held a job that carries with it no little responsibility, and that almost all the candidates in the primaries for the 2000 presidential election had some variation of a southern or south midland accent.¹¹ It is generally accepted precept in sociolinguistics that an accent that may be stigmatized in one social context may command prestige in another.

Certainly there is an added potency to accent bias when it accompanies genuine economic or social power. But to focus solely on that one truism misses the larger point. Lippi-Green in effect denies that there is any situational potency to accent bias that does not fit her pattern, an assertion that is clearly untrue on a factual level and theoretically is at best a serious oversimplification of a fascinating but very complex phenomenon. Further, her use of anecdotal evidence is inadequate to support her key assertions, both serious charges: first, that the teaching of a "General American" accent constitutes an important cause of cultural division in America, not merely a symptom of it, and second, that accent teachers are consciously or unconsciously complicit in the perpetration of a serious social evil. Anecdotes, assuming they are factual, can be useful evidence. (I hope they are, since I have already used them in this essay.) But their utility is restricted to supporting assertions where a single instance of the evidence recounted in the anecdote suffices to make the point. That clearly isn't the case here, where it is the predominance of evidence that is telling. Lippi-Green leaves out all the evidence opposing her thesis, creating thereby a false impression.

¹¹ And that Hillary Rodham Clinton apparently had to acquire some aspects of an Arkansas accent to be accepted by the electorate during her husband's tenure as Governor.

The native tongue

Lippi-Green has a fall-back position that is also curious in that it undermines her main point, a little like the murder suspect who insists that he didn't do it and what's more it was self-defense. In addition to approaching the material from the ideology of current trends in sociolinguistics, she also apparently is a Chomskyan "nativist"¹² who believes that language acquisition structures are for the most part hard-wired in the human brain and that children lose most, if not all, of their ability to learn new language structures after their early years.

The controversy within linguistics over nativism is one that I have absolutely no competence to comment upon, except as it pertains to accent. A corollary of the nativist interpretation of language learning is that accent acquisition abilities are similarly hard-wired and that persons lose their ability to learn any new accent after their mid-teens. Lippi-Green puts it this way:

A person's accent (the bundle of distinctive intonation and phonological features) is fixed or hard-wired in the mind, and once past a certain age it can only be very laboriously changed, to a very limited degree, regardless of commitment, intelligence, and resources. Thus the constant public debate on good English, on the one right English, is a fruitless exercise as the hypothetical congressional debate on the ideal height and weight for all adults. We cannot purge language of variation linked to social difference, but more important than that undeniable fact: *it should not matter*. (241)

In his highly readable and interesting book "The Language Instinct," fellow-Chomskyan Steven Pinker makes a similar point in asserting that accent teachers and actors in theatre and film really never quite get it right:

The actress Meryl Streep is renowned in the United States for her seemingly convincing accents, but I am told that in England, her British accent in *Plenty* was considered rather awful, and that her Australian accent in the movie about the dingo that ate the baby didn't go over too well down there, either. (Pinker, 290)

I leave it to my fellow accent teachers to ruminate on the accuracy of Pinker's assessment of Ms. Streep as an exemplar of theatrical accents in general, but evidence based on one actor seems, on the face of it, woefully insufficient to support his generalization that accurate accent acquisition by adults is completely impossible. And if Pinker and Lippi-Green are right on this point, then they have undermined the rest of Lippi-Green's argument, since presumably no one over the age of 18 successfully assimilates his or her accent to any prescriptive standard. (In which case, we might ask, what was all the noise about?)

I have no doubt that accent acquisition, after the late teenage years, is difficult. My own experience as a teacher tells me that people who become immersed in a new accent group after the age of 18 or so usually will not assimilate to the new group without the intervention of accent training. However, to suggest that the development of sophisticated accent skills by adults is neurologically impossible appears to me simply untrue, and I imagine that most accent coaches for theatre or film would concur. People change accents all the time, in "real life" and certainly onstage,

¹² Two very accessible books on either side of the debate about the nativist theories of Noam Chomsky are Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994) and Geoffrey Sampson's *Educating Eve: The 'Language Instinct' Debate* (London and New York: Cassell, 1997).

though often they need a little help. Indeed much of Professor Lippi-Green's own evidence, if genuine, supports precisely this point.

The price of ideology

Unquestionably, marginalized groups are stigmatized because of accent, as well as a multitude of other characteristics. But to ascribe, as Lippi-Green does, the very existence of stigmatized accents to political ideology alone seems on the face of it an absurd oversimplification. What is more, reliance alone on ideological interpretation leads her to make some extreme and unsupportable assertions about accent teachers as she moves into the never-never-land of conspiracy theory:

The process of language subordination targets not all variation, not all language varieties, but only those which are emblematic of differences in race, ethnicity, homeland, or other social allegiances which have been found to be less than good enough. Dedicated practitioners of language subordination do not complain about most of the variation which is active in US English. There has never been an outcry about Chicagoans' inability to distinguish between *merry*, *Mary*, and *marry*. Nor are there essays in local papers on the stupidity and unworthiness of people who say *cawfee* rather than *cahfee* or *cuu-ofee*....

It has been demonstrated time and again, and not just in this volume, that ideology is most effective when its workings are least visible, and standard language ideology in the US functions like a silent but efficient machine. Its practitioners are terribly skillful at coercing consent and participation from those people and groups who suffer the most under the weight of language ideology. (240, 242)

While it is true that ideology based on tacit assumption may be harder to interrogate, in these last two sentences Lippi-Green has made a crucial shift from analysis to the non-falsifiability of a closed belief system: the less evidence of a conspiracy I have, the more it proves what a clever and powerful conspiracy it is. Driven by her own bias, she is also ignoring in this statement a generally recognized characteristic in dialectology about accent bias: as Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes point out,¹³ consonant differences are usually stigmatized by Americans more than vowel differences.

Enter Intelligibility

There is one final problem with this kind of sociolinguistic analysis of accent modification in the general population, and it is a big one. Lippi-Green, Frazer, and Pinker all completely ignore any data, if controlled statistical data exists, on an entire category of study that would seem to me

¹³ "Although there may be some social stigma attached to certain pronunciation differences, phonological dialect differences, particularly vowel differences, are usually considered to be matters of curiosity rather than grounds for condemnation. Speakers may comment on the *o* of Wisconsin speech or the 'broad *a*' of Boston as regional peculiarities without attaching particular social stigma or prestige to them. Consonantal differences are more apt to be socially diagnostic than vowel differences and may even lead to the stigmatization of speakers as 'stupid' or 'uneducated,' as in the case of *dese*, *dem*, and *dose* for 'these', 'them', and 'those', *baf* for 'bath', and *takin'* for 'taking'." (Wolfram, Schilling-Estes, 75)

should be of at least passing interest to them: intelligibility.¹⁴ For them the issues of accent assimilation are solely and completely about social acceptance. The possibility that a person might want to modify her accent because others literally don’t comprehend what she is saying just doesn’t seem to enter into the equation. There is an obvious speculation as to the reason for these theorists’ failure to discuss intelligibility: it doesn’t fit their ideological mold; in fact it breaks that mold, because if a person finds she cannot be understood by a large proportion of her listeners, she just might consult an accent specialist as an expression of her free choice to be understood, not because she has been forced to do so by the mores of a conformist society. And I suggest that it is in the area of intelligibility that most work in accent acquisition, or accent modification, or “accent reduction,” lies. I know that some accent specialists will decline to work with clients where intelligibility is not an issue.

Ultimately this ideological assault on accent teachers by a few sociolinguists seems an exercise in hyperbole. Widespread prescriptive speech teaching as a major part of primary or secondary school curricula in the USA is a thing of the distant past, and it will not soon return—for budgetary reasons, if nothing else. Given all the other factors influencing language change in the USA, the relatively small band of accent teachers¹⁵ in private practice, no matter what their competence or motivations might be, affect only a very tiny portion of the general public; far too few to do any ideology much good, certainly not enough to serve as “dedicated practitioners” of a “silent and efficient machine” of “language subordination.”

Back to the stage

Speech teachers in a theatrical setting meet the issue of intelligibility head-on. Unfortunately, like anything we meet head-on, the immediate result can often be stunned immobility, because the first thing we run into is a problem: the audience. Beyond question, an actor’s ability to communicate the verbal messages within the theatrical event is a major part (often the major part) of the art of acting, whether the performance is realized through text or improvisation, through realistic speech acts or stylized vocalizations. Daniel Jones’s goal of being “widely understood” seems to be the proverbial bottom line on stage as well as in life.

Precisely where that line is drawn is another matter. As Lippi-Green correctly points out in another context, there is a mutual responsibility for successful communication in a verbal interaction. The listener, even in a theatre, is responsible for listening actively as much as the speaker is responsible for speaking in a comprehensible manner—although theatre audiences might reasonably object to being subjected to formal tests of their hearing abilities and attention spans before being allowed to look at their programs. But the very act of listening may be becoming something of a lost art in a world where auditory experiences are so often amplified, equalized, and filtered prior to or in the course of the artistic event, where the sound of an actual unamplified human voice or solo violin or woodwind octet floating throughout a performance space may seem to some listeners less impressive than the recorded version we heard full-blast on that CD at home; the actual event may seem less “real” somehow. Those audience members who increasingly lobby for electronic “sound enhancement” at live performances these days may not have so much a

¹⁴ Sociolinguists, as the name implies, focus their research on the societal implications of language change, while perceptual studies of language are mostly conducted by researchers in psychology. But on this issue it is baffling that there is not more cross-disciplinary curiosity.

¹⁵ In Lippi-Green’s own (already quoted) words: “In any city of average size, there will be a few people...” (140)

functional hearing problem as an underlying discomfort in the presence of music or words that require their sustained and focused attention instead of flooding them with vibrations. The norm of “listening” today is the high decibel amplification of music pumped directly into the ear through stereo headphones, the surround-sound thunder of the latest massive onscreen explosion, the high-amplitude low-frequency rumble that substitutes for genuine suspense in the rented movies on our home entertainment centers. How can mere unamplified human speech compete with all that?

If we reach the point where virtual experience completely shuts out even casual conversation, the prognosis is indeed bleak. But as long as human beings have some basis for comparison, there is genuine hope for live theatre. Even to the desensitized ear, the overwhelmed eye, and the ten-second attention span, there is something unique about live performance that argues for its long-term survival, even in a diminished state. The actual sharing of unmediated communication among living human beings can become—even as it becomes rarer—a unique and cherished experience. As long as it remains “widely understood” by the various individual listeners who comprise any audience.

The challenge to let the words of the play meet audiences more than halfway is still there, more pressing than ever. The passage of the actor’s imagination into the listener’s imagination through strings of words requires the total marshaling of intelligence, intensity of spirit, and the focus of all the actor’s vocal resources. An actor’s total physical characterization and gestural vocabulary will help to convey the message, suprasegmental features such as intonation and voice quality certainly will convey much of the message, but on stage the required constant is that the words themselves be easy for a dialectically diverse audience to understand, and when those words were written in the late sixteenth century, the challenge is all the greater. We cannot meet that challenge without some standard or standards for articulation in the theatre.

There is a growing agreement in theatre training about what these “standards” will not be based upon. They will not rest on the cultural bias or individual whim of euphony—“pretty” versus “ugly” speech sounds. They will not be based on social class distinctions: terms like “cultivated” and “cultured” can be safely banished to the flower garden and the yogurt dish respectively. They will not be based—ever—on stigmatizing any regional or foreign accent. In fact, they will not be founded on the bankrupt assumption that there must be a single “standard” stage accent of any sort, even for classical plays. Finally, I suggest (though I do not envision success) that we grant a graceful retirement, with a generous pension, to the word that has been such a friend and comfort to us all over the long years: “clarity.” Clarity is a term that has become too polluted through time with the other considerations listed above. If we want a word that perhaps comes closer to what we would like to mean by clarity, we come back to “intelligibility:” an alert listener’s perceptions of the speaker’s physical actions of articulation that turn a string of sounds into communication on the most basic denotative level. Only here can we set any possible standard that will not fall because of the fluidity of language change or its own pretensions.

Back to Jones

It is time to take another look at Daniel Jones’s definition of RP as the most—and only—widely understood accent in England. We know that he considered it to be understood widely because it was spoken throughout Great Britain by persons of power and prestige, and was thus a part of the accent experience of most listeners there, not because most people in England or the

British Empire actually used that accent in their own speech.¹⁶ But the somewhat unspecific phrase "widely understood" became the platform on which proponents of RP as a "Standard Speech" could pitch their tent: it allowed for the possibility that this putative wide understanding was achieved by virtue of some intrinsic superiority of RP's phonological features, not because of extrinsic social or political forces.¹⁷ The same argument was used for years in promoting World English in American schools and continues today to promote the Good American Speech pattern of Edith Skinner and Margaret Prendergast McLean on the American stage. Many of us in America today still accept without question that RP (and therefore Good American Speech) must have a higher degree of intelligibility than other regional British or American accents. But this is by no means self-evident.

In the American theatre, actors in classical plays for many years dutifully mimicked RP with varying degrees of success, and in the middle years of the 20th century began to move into the "mid-Atlantic" sound (somewhere between North America and Great Britain) of "Good American Speech." But even as the myth of a British model for theatre speech grew in this country's theatrical community, RP in Britain was being vigorously criticized by speakers of other accents of English as lacking in consonant muscularity and vowel differentiation. Even in the US, some people were questioning whether RP was really so "widely understood" after all. In the early 1930's the American humorist Robert Benchley wrote an essay¹⁸ venting his frustration at visiting English theatrical troupes whose actors he could not understand when they spoke on the New York stage:

This slurring of words into a refined cadence until they cease to be words at all is due partly to the Englishman's disinclination to move his lips. Evidently the lips and teeth are held stationary for the most part, open just wide enough to let air in for breathing (many Englishmen must breathe through their mouths, otherwise they would not breathe at all) with an occasional sharp pursing of the lips on a syllable which does *not* call for pursing the lips. This lethargic attitude toward articulation makes more or less of a fool out of a word which is dependent on pronunciation for its success. It makes a rather agreeable sound of it, but practically eliminates it as an agent for expressing thought. (Benchley 166)

Benchley emphasized that he was writing about "the more 'refayned' type of English actor, and even of the ordinary well-educated Englishman" (166) as distinct from Cockney or other regional or class-identified British accents. Later in his essay Benchley gives an example of what one actor, playing Cusins in Shaw's "Major Barbara," sounded like to him. (In my notes I provide a translation—which is more than Benchley did):

Eetsnotth'sao ehvmeh seuhl thett trehbles meh; Eh hev seuhld et teuh efften teh care abeht thett.
Eh hev seuhld et fereh preuhfessorshep. Eh hev seuhld et tescep beinempresioned feh refusin' t'peh
texes fer hengmen's reuhps end ehjust wehrs end things thet ehabheuh. Wot is ehl human

¹⁶ According to David Crystal, less than three percent of the English population today speak RP in its pure form (365) although many more speak some "modified RP."

¹⁷ See Henry Cecil Wyld's 1935 essay, "The Best English: A Claim for the Superiority of Received Standard English," in Crowley, *Proper English?* (213) For a contemporary argument for the intrinsic superiority of RP, see *Language Is Power* by John Honey. Honey has no problem stigmatizing the "Estuary" accent that has substantially supplanted RP in England and elsewhere (166-8) and also American accents (247-9), despite the fact that both are "widely understood" in the sense that Daniel Jones used the term.

¹⁸ "The King's English: Not Murder but Suicide," in *The Benchley Roundup*, edited by Nathaniel Benchley. University of Chicago Press edition, 1983.

cehnduct beht th'daioy end heuhrly sao of ehur seuhls f'trehfles? Wot ehem neuh seoinet feh is neither meneh ehr position nehr cemfet, bet freelity and fpeuher.¹⁹ (168)

One might argue that Benchley is exaggerating for comic effect: no doubt he is. But he is finding humor in what for him was a real problem. And while he is not a phonetician, his credentials as an astute audience member are impeccable; Benchley was one of New York's leading drama critics for two decades.²⁰

Far be it from me to “stigmatize” RP, an accent which has afforded me many thousands of happy hours listening to (and comprehending) English actors at work. But the point, I think, is made. While the RP of which Jones was writing in 1926—virtually identical to the one Benchley was parodying in the early '30's—had certain features of consonant activity that might assist speakers of a variety of English accents to understand it, the same RP also lacked weak (unstressed) vowel differentiation, specificity of post-vocalic approximant formation (especially in final “r” and “l” sounds), and exhibited a tendency to elide syllables and to close front vowels tensely so that they were often confusing to non-RP speakers. They obviously were confusing to Robert Benchley.

Some, though not all, of these same problems afflict the Good American Speech pattern which still holds sway (though the sway is swaying) over American actor training. The conflation of [ɑ],[ʌ] and [ɔ] vowels into [ɒ] in many words, and the elimination of post-vocalic “R color”—to give just two examples—actually reduce the amount of phonological information available to the listener; not fatally, to be sure, but to a degree that is odd in a synthetic speech pattern with pretensions to perfect comprehensibility.

Daniel Jones has one more revelation for us in his introduction to the 1926 edition of “An English Pronouncing Dictionary.” Defenders of the Good American Speech pattern often cite its differences from RP to support their assertion that Good American Speech is truly American, not English—despite that fact that many listeners obstinately mistake it for an English accent. They deny, moreover, that teachers such as McLean and Skinner ever had any connection with the ideology of “World English” pronunciation standards as espoused by Daniel Jones's editor, Walter Ripman, English dialectologist Henry Cecil Wyld, and the group of American speech teachers who were disciples of William Tilly at Columbia University, even though McLean and Skinner were active members of that group.²¹ Finally, they deny emphatically that “World English” was RP in disguise; even back in the 1920's, members of Tilly's New York group, including McLean, insisted in their writings that they were teaching an international standard, not an English accent.²²

Daniel Jones seems not to have been apprised of all this, because in his introduction to the revised edition of his book he makes a revealing observation in the course of commenting on the

¹⁹ “It's not the sale of my soul that troubles me: I have sold it too often to care about that. I have sold it for a professorship. [I have sold it for an income.] I have sold it to escape being imprisoned for refusing to pay taxes for hangman's ropes and unjust wars and things that I abhor. What is all human conduct but the daily and hourly sale of our souls for trifles? What I am now selling it for is neither money [n]or position nor comfort, but for reality and for power.” (Brackets indicate omissions.) *Major Barbara*, III,ii.

²⁰ At *Life* in the 1920s, and *The New Yorker* in the 1930s.

²¹ In fact, McLean was Tilly's assistant.

²² I have discussed the direct and indirect influence of William Tilly and his disciples on theatre speech training in America in some detail in my essay “Standard Speech: The Ongoing Debate” in *The Vocal Vision*, edited by Marian Hampton and Barbara Acker, New York: Applause Theatre Books.

“widely understood” quality of RP: “Several American teachers (mostly from New York and the North-Eastern part of the United States) have indeed informed me, *somewhat to my surprise, that RP or RP with slight modifications would be a suitable standard for teaching in American schools.*”²³ (ix) While Jones does not specifically name these teachers “mostly from New York” as being members of Tilly’s group, it seems highly probable that they are, if only because Tilly’s teachers were in frequent contact with Jones and Ripman and contributed on several occasions to the phonetic journal *Le Maître Phonétique* while Jones was its editor during the mid-1920s; the Tilly group also established World English as the dominant ideology for speech training in the New York public school system during this decade, though their influence faded rapidly after that.

This evidence that even the promoters of World English in public education and its variant Good American Speech in theatre training admitted the primacy of British RP as a standard gives added weight to the possible social reasons why RP had become dominant in Great Britain. As we have seen, Jones himself rejects all the obvious social arguments and leaves himself with only the benign observation that RP is “widely understood” as the reason for basing his dictionary on this accent pattern. But because “widely understood” easily transmutes into “clearly understood,” Jones’s observation could be used by educationists to give RP a supposed intrinsic superiority which further facilitated its spread as a standard accent. Indeed Jones’s own discussion of the issue suggests that he was not always rigorous about this distinction. We have seen that RP, considered solely as an accent, not a dialect, was not necessarily as easily understood—in Great Britain and certainly in America—as Jones’s prescriptive colleagues Ripman and Wyld liked to assert. This in turn argues (because there are really no alternative explanations left) that its wide use probably proceeded from social, not linguistic, pressure. RP in its pure form does not really meet the test of its claims to an intrinsic comprehensibility superior to regional English accents,²⁴ nor do RP’s close cousins World English and Good American Speech, even though they can produce an admirable muscularity in the production of certain consonants, particularly stop-plosives. Certain aspects of Good American Speech may aid wide understanding, but other elements, as noted, work against it, and yet other elements—inextricable from the total pattern as taught—are simply irrelevant to comprehension. The only possible standard for theatre speech training we can even begin to support, then, is intelligibility: intelligibility in all human verbal communication within a language, and intelligibility in the theatre.

What is intelligibility, aside from an awkward seven-syllable word?

Most theatre speech teachers are also teachers of accents for use on stage and in film. They may not have considered it directly in this context, but most theatre accent coaches have a keen experiential awareness of what intelligibility is, because they have to modify accuracy of accent all the time to accommodate it. It is the difference between an alert listener understanding what the words emerging from the actor’s mouth mean, and not having a clue. The listener gets Sentence A perfectly; Sentence B is mush. It is amazing how, on this most basic level, all ideology and complex analysis just falls away. Many years ago I listened for several minutes as the department chair of a training program I used to teach in fulminated eloquently against the artificiality of Good American

²³ Emphasis mine. Jones’s surprise seems to me further evidence that he had no such missionary zeal for RP as a worldwide pronunciation standard.

²⁴ Peter Trudgill (196-7) argues that accent, and even lexical, differences in English dialects do not cause as serious comprehension problems as advocates of RP would like to suggest. Trudgill’s data seems persuasive, but much of it does not translate into useful information in a theatrical context.

Speech, after which he casually asked me to stop by his rehearsal that evening because he couldn't make out what several of his leading actors were saying. A self-contradiction, one might say. But in my view he was right both times.

Even as prescriptive patterns go, Good American Speech is not the only alternative to incoherence. Evangeline Machlin's *Speech for the Stage* has remained in print for decades; this book by one of America's most venerated speech teachers, prescriptive as it is, completely avoids the Britishisms of the McLean/Skinner Good American Speech pattern. Arthur Lessac's recommended speech pattern—while I question its reliance on standards of euphony²⁵—modifies the Good American Speech pattern toward some recognizable home on this continent.

But a standard based on intelligibility is not tied to any prescriptive pattern. Rather it is based solely on the speaker's ability to transmit to the listener the appropriate amount of linguistic information to the level of detail and specificity appropriate to the event. If we are speaking casually to a close friend who converses with us often, the appropriate level of articulatory activity may be very low: we send messages about our relationship by the degree of physical specificity and linguistic detail we use, and too much detail might seem self-involved, patronizing, or insincere, just as too little detail might make us sound mush-mouthed. In conversation, and onstage also, we never execute more speech actions than we need unless we have been drilled into excessive action by a prescriptive pattern of "good speech."

However we also need to know that our speech actions can rise to the occasion, as it were. If we have not developed a full repertoire of physical speech skills, we may be ill equipped to deal with challenging texts and uncongenial acoustics. In such contexts the amount of linguistic detail the actor must transmit to the listener in order to reach intelligibility is much greater than in an intimate conversation. But the level of speech activity may shift constantly in a play, constantly redefined in terms of all the other aesthetic factors—acoustic, textual, emotional—that are at work on the actor's mind and spirit. Each individual speech action justifies or fails to justify its own existence at any moment. The only constant standard remains that the actor be perceived as intelligible by the listener.

So intelligibility is linked inextricably to the amount of linguistic detail transmitted through the phonatory process. It is not a rigid pattern; it can never be of real utility to an actor as a rigid pattern. It exists always in a constantly renegotiated dialogue with a real or imagined listener, the only person who, in the end, can define intelligibility in the moment. As speech teachers, we cannot predict too much about this listener; we can only help the actor to develop a range of nimble articulatory skills that will meet the listener's needs using any accent in any play performed in any environment.

Speech training in the United States has finally, belatedly, started to make its break from reliance on a limiting pattern self-defined as good speech. In recent years, alternatives to long-dominant pedagogies have appeared and begun to prove successful in meeting the challenges of speech and accent training for today's theatre. Although they differ considerably in specific methodology, all of them show a vastly increased comprehension of phonetic complexity and a strong emphasis on the total physical and sensory awareness that makes an actor's speech varied, vibrant, and communicative. Since its publication in 1994 Louis Colaianni's book "The Joy of

²⁵ From the Greek, literally "sounding well." The Voice Beautiful, in other words; pretty sounds versus ugly sounds.

Phonetics and Accents" has introduced his "pillows" approach to phonetics teaching to many hundreds of actors in America and abroad; among other virtues, his work allows actors to experience the constant play of varied sounds moving through the body and the imagination until the two become truly unified. William Weiss's Mobile Voice approach to the physical actions of articulation holds great promise for skills development in accent acquisition and vocal characterization. My own Detail Model approach to articulation skills development gives the actor the tactile ability to shape the flow of voice into a complete repertoire of language sounds that can define any accent or character; like Colaianni's and Weiss's approaches, it is being incorporated into an increasing number of training programs in this country. I know that many of our colleagues are conducting their own research into the most effective ways in which actors can not only meet the only realistic speech "standard"—intelligibility—but can go beyond it into the genuine expressiveness of free, responsive, and active articulation.

The most encouraging sign in theatre speech training in this millennial year is that more and more speech teachers, freeing themselves from the traditions that for decades transmitted—unexamined—the received wisdom of the past to new generations of actors, are now asking the fundamental questions about the entire process of speech training, its goals and its methods. Those assumptions that sprout up overnight like mushrooms feeding on the dead wood of our old ideologies (or just possibly on the musty metaphors of our prose) are beginning to be cleared away.

Research?

The ultimate arbiter of intelligibility in the theatre is the combined perception of the audience. The primary arbiter of intelligibility in the theatrical or film production process is the trained sensibility of the voice and speech coach. Developing this sensibility into sensitivity is largely accomplished through direct experience, not research, and probably will always be so. However, research into the phonological criteria for intelligibility between accent groups could prove very important in improving techniques in accent training in the theatre. It could prove even more useful to dialectology and speech pathology. Yet it appears that little if any research into intelligibility has been done up to now. For those speech teachers with affiliation to research universities, the opportunities for cross-disciplinary research would seem considerable.

To some it might seem that "intelligibility" is at once a wholly obvious and excessively modest standard to set for theatre speech. But in practice, onstage, it is the one indicator that determines if the articulation of the language is achieving a basic functional level. Above that level lies the art. But without the functional foundation of intelligibility the art means nothing. And all of us in speech training are acutely aware of just how often this level is not reached. Setting intelligibility as our standard means to focus our training strategies on the development of an expanded repertoire of diverse speech skills—as diverse as the accents and languages we all, as humans, speak. In so doing, we not only meet the minimum "standard," we elevate the art.

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