

AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH HISTORY AND MODERN ACCENTS

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Language is born of culture and in turn reflects the history of a culture. This is evident when comparing English in Britain, the United States and Australia. Of the three dialects, British English has the most confusing grammar and spelling rules. This is most likely a consequence of English standardization processes in the 18th century, when a certain degree of French influence took place [5].

The US dialect is almost universally recognized as the easiest to understand. In comparison to British English, its spelling is more phonetic, grammar more pattern-orientated, and its pronunciation is more legible [5]. In addition, Americans are prone to use persuasive analogies like “the domino theory” in their conversations. The American fondness for a legible and persuasive dialect can probably be traced to the religious history of the United States, liberalist economy and social system that rewards those leaders that have been best able to rally the masses behind them [6].

Australian English is different from British and American English in that it has a bias towards invention, deception, profanity, humor and a classless society [5]. At times, this can make it almost impossible to understand and quite offensive to speakers accustomed to formality. It reflects Australia’s identity conflicts born out of its specific history. In addition, it perhaps reflects assimilation of some Aboriginal names and words, particularly in rural Australia, which may have influenced pronunciation and word choice [8].

The changes in Australian English are deeply connected to the history of the nation. The English language arrived in Australia a little more than 200 years ago and since that time it has been modified and adapted to give Australians a very specific form of language.

The most basic major features of Australian English were established by the 1830s. In the period between colonial settlement (1788) and the 1830s, when the foundation accent was being forged, new lexical items to describe the new environment, especially its flora and fauna, were developed either from Aboriginal languages (coolibah, wombat, wallaby, waratah, and so on) or from the “transported” English word stock (native bear, wild cherry, and so on). Creativity of Australian English in word formation can be seen by some researchers as an influence of convicts, who were deported to this continent in great numbers in the 19th century [8]. Nearly two generations after

the arrival of the First Fleet, 87 per cent of the population were either convicts, ex-convicts or of convict descent. With such strong convict foundations, it was inevitable that Australia's linguistic traditions would be different.

Many more vocabulary items were later added in response to the nineteenth-century process of settlement and expansion. In 1869, British author Marcus Clarke described how Australians devised language to: "convey a more full and humorous notion of all his thoughts" or to conceal "the idea he wishes to convey from all save his own particular friends" [5]. The most notable method of concealment was cockney rhyming slang. Rhyming slang created an idiom type sentence out of two or more words, the last of which rhymed with the intended word. Although few Australians use rhyming slang today, its inventive legacy may be seen in multiple idioms. For example: "kangaroos loose in the top paddock" or "mad as a cut snake" all illustrate a creative application of visual imagery to a linguistic discourse.

Later, in the 20th century, a social separation of the accent occurred. Alongside the general Australian accent, there emerged both a "cultivated" British-sounding Australian accent, and in reaction to that, a very broad "ocker" accent [4, 3]. This 20th-century division of Australian English is largely absent from the accents of today's young people, suggesting that linguistic change runs parallel with social change [3].

Modern Australian English is the standard language spoken in Australia. It is the language used by people who are born and raised in this country and also by those who immigrate during childhood or early adolescence. In addition to English, over 200 languages are spoken in Australia and more than 50,000 people speak an Australian indigenous language [1]. Among native-born Australians, at least three categories of English exist: Standard Australian English, varieties of Aboriginal English, and various ethnocultural Australian English dialects [2]. These variations are sometimes called "Broad", "General" and "Cultivated" accents. For a frame of reference, speech of the following celebrities may be put as an example: popular youtuber Steve Irwin for the "Broad" accent, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard for "General" and actress Cate Blanchett for "Cultivated" [7]. The further on the "Broad" end of the spectrum an accent lies, the more distinctive are the features of said accent.

In Australia, it is very common to hear words like "arvo" being used instead of "afternoon". Known as diminutives, they are formed by taking the first part of a word and substituting an [a], [o], [ie], or [y] sound for the rest. In all, about 5,000 diminutives have been identified in Australian English. There are various explanations of why the diminutive is so common in Australia. [5].

Another significant variable in all variations of English language is pronunciation – British, American and Australian English all have their specific features. The Australian accent is for the most part non-rhotic. This means that the pronunciation of

the [r] sound will never occur at the end of words. Where an American will say three separate sounds for the word car [kar], an Australian native speaker will only say 2 [ka:] [9]. This is a key feature that only occasionally has exceptions.

Sometimes native speakers will pronounce the [r] sound at the end of the word if linking two words closely but only if the next word contains a vowel sound at the start. For example: “The car is running on empty” could be received as [ka:r_ɪz], the last [r] sound of the word “car” is pronounced because a vowel will follow it in the next word and because the speaker is linking words together closely and fluently.

The more cultivated the accent, the more the listener will hear a [t] in all or most positions of a word. Articulation of an explosive [t] without voice vibration 100 % of the time however will not create natural speech patterns for Australian English. Even a “well-spoken” Australian native speaker will show some pronunciation variations.

Most Australians will show instances where the [t] sound is “deleted” or “flapped”. T-deletion manifests when [t] sound at the end of some words is pronounced very indistinctively or is not pronounced at all, just like speakers with an American accent. When the [t] sound is deleted a glottal stop is inserted in its place. T-flapping is the softening of [t] in the middle of words or at the end of words between vowels. When the sound is “flapped”, it will resemble more closely a /d/ sound. Therefore “letter” [lɛtə] may at times sound like “ledder” [lɛɾɹ]. When native speakers flap the “t” it usually results in a vowel change at the end of the word. Flapping is also present in General American Accent [9].

When an Australian native speaker pronounces words that often contain a “consonant letter + u” (for example words like “music, Tuesday, tune, intuition”) they will insert a very distinctive [j] phoneme. This refers to the phonetic sound [j] which can be heard at the start of words like “yes, yellow, you”. Australians will insert the [j] in many contexts where speakers of other English accents won’t use it [9].

The diphthong in words such as “kite”, “ride”, “mine” etc. gets more pronounced in the “Broad” accent, moving toward the diphthong in words like “choice” (i.e. retracted and raised). Hence a “Cultivated” Australian speaker might pronounce “buy” somewhat close to a General American speaker (i.e. [baɪ]), while a “Broad” accent speaker, on the other hand, might pronounce it closer to American “boy” (i.e. [bɔɪ]). In words such as “mouth”, “loud” and “out” “Broad” accent the first part of the diphthong moves toward the “e” in “dress” [ɛɹ] instead of [aʊ]. [7].

One more distinct feature of modern Australian English is that it often contains higher levels of nasal resonance to oral resonance. Resonance refers to voice acoustics and is determined by where the bulk of sound vibration from the voice is reinforced in the vocal tract. Among Australian native speakers there is a trend for vowels to be articulated with high energy spectrum in the mouth as well as nasal passage ways. This

is what creates a distinct form of voicing that makes Australian speakers sound very different from BBC presenters who typically have higher ratios of oral (internal mouth based) sound waves.

In regards to spelling and grammar, Australia uses a mix of American and British spelt words [5].

As a general rule, words less than five letters tend to be spelt in the British style while those over five letters are more likely to be American. Some of the identity politics involved were illustrated in the spelling of the word “labour”. The Australian Labor Party adopted American spelling in the early 20th century in order to associate itself with American libertarian ideals. While using American spelling for the Labor Party is acceptable, British spelling for the act of labour is expected. American spelling for words like “organization” is more common than British “organisation”.

In Britain, collective nouns are usually defined as plural. For example, the British would say, “The couple are happy”. American grammar is more pattern orientated so a noun is defined as plural when it has an “s”. For example, Americans would say, “The couple is happy” (singular) but “The two cowboys are happy”. In Australia, both British and American tradition have become standard as a result of American television and American computer grammar checks mixing with traditional British instruction.

During its development, attitudes towards Australian speech changed multiple times, and in that controversial process, under the influence of British mass media and American pop-culture a unique blend of English was created. The Australian accent has been around for more than two hundred years and it will continue to evolve, developing its own specific features while absorbing from modern British and American variations and adapting to modern environment.

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