Setting a Standard

Early BBC Language Policy and the Advisory Committee on Spoken English

Jürg Rainer Schwyter

‘Early days are crucial ones in either individual existence or corporate organisation. I repeat, we had no precedent. Almost everything depended upon the personality of those to whom, almost by chance, this service had been committed.’

(J.C.W. Reith, Broadcast over Britain, 1924, p. 24)

It will be my aim in this contribution to describe – with the help of linguistic examples, historical BBC documents and articles from the BBC weekly magazine *Radio Times* – the language policy of the early BBC, or more specifically the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English 1926–1939, and also to give some impressions of the public’s reaction to that policy. I will concentrate on the early days, as ‘early days are crucial ones’, to quote Reith (1924: 24), but I hope it will also become clear that the influence of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English can still be felt today, whatever changes in language policy the BBC has introduced in more recent years.

1. Introduction

The BBC or British Broadcasting Corporation has been an integral part of life in Britain and many other countries for over 85 years. It would be difficult to imagine our media landscape without the BBC and its numerous domestic radio and TV channels as well as its World Service, Internet sites and various satellite channels.

In short, the BBC is a British *institution* par excellence – and not just when it comes to entertainment and reliable coverage of news items from around the globe, but also when it comes to Spoken English. ‘The influence of the
Note that Lloyd James, in a paper entitled ‘The Spoken Word’ and published in 1936 in *The Magazine of the English Association*, speaks of ‘the so-called BBC English’ at which ‘arm-chair critics rail’ (on p. 60, R6/196/9; references beginning with ‘R6’ relate to various files from the BBC Written Archives Centre in Caversham, see References for details).

The rapid development in public broadcasting after about 1920 led in England and abroad to the establishment of BBC English as a *de facto* spoken standard. The standard, alternatively known as Received Pronunciation, is that of a social and educational élite, originally developed from the manner of speech approved by the nineteenth-century public schools, and concurrently by the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

Interestingly enough, the term ‘BBC English’ originally had a rather negative connotation and was used ‘among regional BBC staff resentful of the better prospects of speakers with public-school accents’ (McArthur 1992: 109).¹ The fact that in the 1920s the two terms ‘BBC English’ and ‘public school accent’ were perceived as largely synonymous speaks volumes about the public image and composition of the early BBC.

But before I proceed to give a brief account of the language policy of the early BBC, it will be necessary to clarify, from a *linguistic* point of view, what we mean by ‘Standard English’, ‘Spoken Standard’ and ‘Received Pronunciation’ – all terms used in a rather nonchalant way by the authors quoted above.

We need to distinguish between Written and Spoken Standard English. In the written medium, according to Smith (1996), Standard English refers to a set of grammatical, lexical and also spelling rules, many of which were *fixed* by the prescriptive 18th-century grammar and dictionary writers; and Spoken Standard English, again as described by Smith, is a prestigious system of grammar and lexis which can be used by any speaker in communities where English is the first language, available for any register of language (as opposed to varieties which are often termed ‘restricted’ or ‘dialectal’). In the British Isles, it can be, but need not be, expressed in Received Pronunciation, a prestigious accent of English associated with, but not restricted to, the South-East of England. Thus it is possible to speak Standard English with a Scottish, Welsh, American or Yorkshire accent. (1996: 65)

In other words, Spoken Standard English does not have a single accent associated with it. Much confusion therefore results, first, from including accent in any definition of Spoken Standard English, and secondly, from simply transferring the notion of *fixity* from Written Standard English to Spo-
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2 What is known as hapyY-tensing involves the replacement in word-final position of the lax vowel /a/ with the tense vowel /i:/ in e.g. happy or city; both pronunciations, /a/ and /i/, are now considered RP (Wells 1982: 294; Trudgill 2002: 175). As for again, Wells (1982: 295) includes its varying pronunciation in a list of ‘very common words […] having two or more rival forms in RP’, although he considers the pronunciation /a/ ‘more usual’. The ‘rival forms’ of again were also discussed by the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English; see below, §3.

3 Trudgill (1999: 126–7; reprinted 2002: 168–9), however, has argued that – due to linguistic change and the spread of non-standard forms to the standard – Standard English is not totally discrete either. He illustrates this with the use of than as preposition, which is acceptable to most speakers of Standard English in e.g. He is bigger than me, but not (yet?) in e.g. He is bigger than what I am. See Hughes, Trudgill and Watt (2005: 18–23) for further, regional and age-group, variation within the Standard English dialect (with respect to contracted negatives, indirect objects, participle forms following need and want, auxiliary versus full verb have, and a number of modals).

4 Wells (1982: 279–301) not only usefully distinguishes between varieties of RP, such as ‘mainstream RP’, ‘upper-crust’ or ‘U-RP’, ‘adoptive RP’ and ‘near RP’, but also discusses various types of variability within mainstream RP, thus proving Smith’s point. See also Hughes, Trudgill and Watt (2005: 39–41), who ‘speak of RP as a single accent’, but one with ‘significant variability within it’ (at 39). It is equally true, however, that ‘it takes only one non-RP feature [e.g. /h/-dropping] for a speaker not to be a speaker of RP’; in that sense, ‘RP is a standard accent which has undergone, albeit implicitly rather than explicitly, codification’ (Trudgill 2002: 174). For a much stricter notion of RP as a ‘fully-fledged standard variety with a high degree of standardness’, that is ‘minimal variation in form’, see Altendorf (2003: 27–9).

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John Reith, the BBC’s first managing director, and his contemporaries were well aware of pronunciation variation among educated speakers of English. For this reason they set up the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English: to fix what had hitherto only been focused – that is nothing less than to create a ‘standard pronunciation’.

2. The Formation of the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English

The BBC started life as the British Broadcasting Company (note: Company, not yet Corporation) in 1922. From very early on the BBC was meant to be a tool not only to entertain, in the most positive sense, but also to educate ‘the great multitude’, namely by ‘carry[ing] into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement’ (Reith 1924: 34). ‘It followed naturally’, as Briggs (1995a: 218) has pointed out, ‘that genuine differences of opinion would be expressed about what constituted “the best”’. Reith not only reinforced the conception of the BBC as a public service by employing outside programme advisers and critics, but he also tried to solve any ‘differences of opinion’ by creating a ‘network of advisory committees which drew upon the services of experts in various fields’ (Briggs 1995a: 218–9).

Examples of such advisory committees are the Religious Advisory Committee, the Musical Advisory Committee, the Children’s Hour Committee and the Women’s Advisory Committee (these two committees soon lapsed), and the Central Educational Advisory Committee. One of the ‘offshoots’ of the Central Educational Advisory Committee, to which Reith himself attached the utmost importance, was the Advisory Committee on Spoken English, which was formed in 1926 (Briggs 1995a: 219–28).

In fact, the language education aspect of the BBC was quite explicitly stated by Reith as early as 1924 in the chapter entitled ‘The King’s English’ of his famous Broadcast over Britain:

I have heard it said that one can place a man socially and educationally from the first few dozen words he utters. There is a measure of truth in the state-

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5 The ‘old regime’, however, was soon to end: on 1 January 1927 a Corporation was created for, initially, a period of ten years (for details, see Briggs 1995a: 297–371).
6 For other, literary, examples of this generally well-meaning, albeit – from a present-day point of view – patronizing attitude in early 20th-century Britain, see John Carey, The Intellectuals and the Masses (1992).
7 ‘In addition to the Central Advisory Committee, each station has its own Local Education Advisory Committee, and in this way we have been able to secure the co-operation and interest of Local Education Authorities throughout England, Scotland and Wales’ (Reith 1924: 157).
ment. It is certainly true that even the commonest and simplest words are subjected to horrible and grotesque abuse. One hears the most appalling travesties of vowel pronunciation. This is a matter in which broadcasting may be of immense assistance. [...] No one would deny the great advantage of a standard pronunciation of the language, not only in theory, but in practice. Our responsibilities in this matter are obvious, since in talking to so vast a multitude, mistakes are likely to be promulgated to a much greater extent than was ever possible before. There is now presented to any who may require it, an opportunity of learning by example. (Reith 1924: 161–2, my emphasis)

Judging from the press of those early years and the many ‘Letters to the Editor’ in the Radio Times, the public in general was quite happy with the idea that announcers could or should be their teachers, as this fairly typical voice from the same year as Reith’s Broadcast English, 1924, illustrates:

**Announcers as Teachers**

Happily for us, the officials of our Broadcasting Company have been well chosen, and are all educated and refined men and women, who use cultivated language to which it is a pleasure to listen. Unlike in America, the very tones of our own announcers’ voices are an indication of a background of education and culture. In America, it seems, one hears daily slips in grammar, faults in diction, and the mispronunciation of both English and foreign words. In England such slipshod broadcasting is unknown. We look upon our announcers as teachers. And they are. – William Le Queux in The Scots Pictorial (Radio Times, 18 January 1924)

Note the terms ‘educated’, ‘cultivated’ and so on in connection with language use. Such attitudes are a product of the 19th century, when “[c]ulture”, “refinement”, status, and superiority were, according to popular belief, all able to be conveyed within the nuances of a variety of pronunciation’ (Mugglestone 2003: 258–9). This confusion of speech and cultural and moral qualities can in fact still be found today.

Two additional points, however, should be made here. First, ‘the public image’ of the BBC was very much a male one, ‘drawn from upper-class or upper middle-class life’ (Briggs 1995a: 167). The broadcasters, ‘mostly young men’, were in ‘a large portion [...] University undergraduates’ (Reith 1924: 37,

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8 William Le Queux (1864–1927) was a fairly well-known writer of thrillers and spy novels at the time, an ‘avid self-publicist’, according to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB 2004–7), who ‘wrote his way from obscurity to wealth and celebrity’.

9 Gimson (1984: 45), too, has commented on the English preoccupation to cultivate ‘for at least four centuries [...] a concept of a form of pronunciation which has been considered more correct, desirable, acceptable or elegant than others.’

10 Jean Aitchison (1997: 9) quotes Norman (Lord) Tebbit, a former Tory cabinet minister: ‘If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy [...] at school [...] all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards then there’s no imperative to stay out of crime.’
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51. Formality in all aspects was seen as absolutely crucial: for example, it was decided in 1925 that announcers ‘should be required to wear dinner jackets’ when on duty in the evening as ‘an act of courtesy to the artist’ (Briggs 1995a: 268); and, in their dinner jackets, they should speak ‘good English and without affectation’ (Reith 1924: 162). The most appropriate medium for this, it was agreed, was Public School Pronunciation – eventually Daniel Jones abandoned the term PSP and followed Wyld in using Received Pronunciation, a label first utilized by A.J. Ellis (Gimson 1984: 45; Strässler 2005) – as this accent ‘would convey a suitable sense of sobriety, impartiality, and impersonality’ (McArthur 1992: 110). Thus, as we have seen, the eventual equation of Public School Accent, BBC English and Received Pronunciation.¹¹

The second point is this: it may be asked whether in fact radio and TV can influence people’s speech behaviour and, if so, to what extent. Labov and Harris (1986: 20), for example, have claimed that ‘linguistic traits are not transmitted across group boundaries simply by exposure to other dialects in the mass media or [even] in schools’ – with the exception of a few self-conscious corrections, sometimes hypercorrections, in formal styles. Trudgill (1986: 39–41) explains why: as accommodation seems the most likely explanation for the spread of linguistic features from speaker to speaker, that is the conscious or unconscious convergence of a speaker to the speech of his/her interlocutors, face-to-face contact is obviously a prerequisite for linguistic diffusion to take place. It is thus clear that ‘the electronic media are not very instrumental in the diffusion of linguistic innovations, in spite of widespread popular notions to the contrary’, a fact supported by ‘the geographical patterns associated with linguistic diffusion’: Were nationwide radio and television the major source of this diffusion, then the whole of Britain would be influenced by a particular innovation simultaneously. This of course is not what happens: London-based innovations reach Norwich before they reach Sheffield, and Sheffield before they reach Newcastle. (Trudgill 1986: 40)

By contrast, neither the broader public nor Reith and his contemporaries at the BBC seem to have doubted the Company’s mission and success. Though Reith admitted that it was impossible to ‘compute in concrete terms’ the influence broadcasting would have on people’s pronunciation, he insisted

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¹¹ Gimson (1994: 78–9) states that because the BBC used to recommend an RP pronunciation to its announcers ‘RP often became identified in the public mind with “BBC English”’. And in the latest edition of his English phonetics textbook, Roach (2000: vii, 3–4) has substituted the terms Received Pronunciation and RP, which he now considers ‘old-fashioned and misleading’ with BBC Pronunciation, as ‘BBC is the accent that has always been chosen by British teachers to teach to foreign learners, and it is the accent that has been most fully described and has been used as the basis for textbooks and pronouncing dictionaries.’
12 Gimson (1994: 77–8) has justly remarked that ‘there have always been at any one time disparities between the speech sounds of the younger and older generations’ and that therefore ‘the speech of the young is traditionally characterized by the old as slovenly and debased.’
Additionally, the apparent need ‘to stem modern tendencies’ is a clear reflection of what Jean Aitchison (2001: 13) has called a ‘vintage year’ view of language; or as Gimson put it a little more technically, ‘within RP, those habits of pronunciation that are most firmly established tend to be regarded as ‘correct’, whilst innovation tends to be stigmatized’ (1994: 80).

The (undated) front page of the Advisory Committee’s minute book not only repeats the brief mission statement, but also illustrates what a most distinguished body this actually was:

The British Broadcasting Company, recognising their responsibility in setting a standard of spoken English, have appointed the following to act as an Advisory Committee: –
Dr. Robert Bridges [a former physician, Poet Laureate since 1913 and a founder of the Society for Pure English; Bridges became chairman of the Advisory Committee];
Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith [a naturalised American literary scholar and essayist representing on the Committee the Society for Pure English, which he co-founded with Bridges and others in 1913];
Mr. G. Bernard Shaw [the famous Irish playwright, critic and polemicist, whose keen interest in phonetics and spelling reform was well known – not least through his hugely successful play *Pygmalion* with its almost one hundred sell-out performances between April and August 1914];
Mr. Daniel Jones [Professor of Phonetics at University College London, assistant secretary and later secretary of the International Phonetic Association, and compiler of the *English Pronouncing Dictionary*, first published in 1917];
Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson [a well-known actor and theatre manager, who was not only ‘one of the most distinguished speakers of the British stage’ (*Radio Times*, 16 July 1926) but also ‘widely regarded as the finest Hamlet of his time’ (ODNB 2004–7)];
Mr. A. [Arthur] Lloyd James [a Welsh phonetician at the School of Oriental and African Studies and former pupil and colleague of Jones at UCL; Lloyd James had advised the BBC before and became the Advisory Committee’s honorary secretary].

The Company will refer to this Committee for advice on the pronunciation of new words or imports from foreign languages which are becoming acclimatised.

The Committee will advise in respect of the London and Daventry stations, where the B.B.C. intend to maintain a standard of educated Southern English. It is not intended to impose this standard upon the Northern, Scottish or Irish stations. Pronunciations as adopted on the advice of the Committee will be

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14 For a comprehensive account of Jones’s life and career, see Collins and Mees (1999); Strässler (2005) mainly focuses on Jones’s linguistics.
made known to the Company’s official announcers in the Southern stations. (R6/201/1)

What is interesting is not only the focus on the treatment of loan-words in English and the aim to maintain ‘a standard of educated Southern English’ – precisely the variety that, according to Henry Sweet’s 1881 *Elementary Sounds of English*, is ‘approximated to, all over Great Britain, by those who do not keep their local dialects’ (quoted by Mugglestone 2003: 258) – but above all the Committee’s self-imposed restriction to the London and Daventry stations. Whether this was out of respect for other regional varieties of English, golden-triangle centricity, the absence of a Scot on the Committee (at least in 1926), or a sense that everything north of Watford is a lost cause anyway, I leave up to the reader to decide; unfortunately the BBC files do not make clear how and when this decision had been reached.¹⁵

The first official meeting of the Committee was held only ten days later, on 5 July 1926. Two points stand out from that meeting. First, the Committee put itself up as the BBC’s absolute authority in matters of what is referred to as ‘doubtful words’. The following resolution was unanimously carried, namely

that in the case of doubtful words it is advisable for the B.B.C. to adopt a uniform pronunciation for use by announcers and other officials of the Company in their work, and that the Committee, after due consideration of derivations and traditional usages [note: ‘traditional usages’], will decide upon the term to be adopted. (R6/201/1)

The aim was not only to achieve consistency, but to achieve it through a rather prescriptive approach, certainly for announcers and, once pronunciation had been successfully standardized, eventually for ‘most educated persons’ (see below, R6/196/1). With hindsight, though, it was acknowledged that acceptance of a standard as defined by the BBC could not be forced upon the public at large. A brief, undated summary of the history and function of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English (probably written shortly after the Committee’s suspension at the outbreak of the Second World War, as the past form is used throughout and references are made to publications as late as 1937) is quite explicit on these points: with the workings of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English

the B.B.C. hoped to lay the foundations of a standard pronunciation which would eventually be common to most educated persons, although it emphasized from time to time that is [sic] published lists of words were for the guidance of B.B.C. announcers and other officials, and were not an attempt to dictate to the general public how it should speak, as was so often alleged. It

¹⁵ Reith of course was a Scot, born in Kincardineshire and educated in Glasgow and Norfolk (ODNB 2004–7), but he did not serve on the Committee and certainly never participated in the day-to-day decisions on matters of pronunciation.
was not suggested that the chosen pronunciations were the only ‘right’ ones. 
(R6/196/1)

Secondly, at the first meeting a number of ‘general principles’ of pronunciation were agreed so that rules for announcers could be drawn up:

Vowel sounds in accented syllables. The Committee agreed that it was desirable to oppose any tendency towards the increase of homophones in the language, and that the announcers should therefore be instructed to differentiate the vowel sounds in such groups of words as shaw, shore, sure; yore, your; tired, tarred, etc.

Vowel sounds in unaccented syllables. The Chairman demonstrated that it is possible to give all vowels in unaccented syllables a flavour of their original character without unduly stressing the syllable containing them, and that indeed the matter was merely one of good or bad articulation, e.g. the slovenly speaker uses a single sound (represented by ‘eh’) for all vowels in unaccented syllables. He says parehdy, parehsite, Julieh, Ephelieh, where the speaker with good articulation says parody, parasite, Julia and Ophelia. It was agreed that the announcers should attempt the differentiation of such vowel sounds, but without becoming stilted.

Purity of Vowel sounds. The Committee were in agreement that all affectations such as compaoused, for composed, m’yah for mere, nem for name, which definitely prejudice the purity of vowel sounds, should be opposed.

The ‘h’ in which, why, whale, etc. After some discussion it was decided that speakers of Southern English would find difficulty in pronouncing which, whale, why, white, etc. with the aspirated ‘w’, and that no definite principle could be determined in this case, although differentiation between which and witch, whale and wail, etc. should be recommended in order to avoid homophones.

Untrilled final ‘r’ and ‘r’ between vowels. The possibility of pronouncing the ‘r’ in fire, tower, sure, hour, poor, etc. without trilling, was demonstrated. It was felt, however, that Southern English speakers having come to be unaware that such ‘r’s’ had any sound value whatever, would have considerable trouble in pronouncing an untrilled ‘r’. If that were so, it was agreed that the untrilled ‘r’ should be treated as a separate vowel, though not syllabic, e.g. tired to be pronounced tired, not tahd [i.e. no smoothing either]$.^{16}$ It was agreed that an attempt should be made to give the letter some sound value, however slight.

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$^{16}$ The monophthongization process of, in this case, the triphthong in /ˈtaːd/ to /ˈtaːd/ is commonly referred to as smoothing (see Wells 1982: 238–42).
The adoption of French ‘age’ sound into English.

The Chairman proposed that the broad ‘a’ (of father) in such words as garage, mirage, rajah should be recognised, and that an attempt should be made to adopt the sound of the French ‘age’ into English, rather than to add to the list, already too long, of words ending in the sound ‘ehdge’. Agreement was not reached on these proposals, though it was later decided not to anglicise the word ‘garage’ as yet.

Foreign words

No definite rule was found possible as to the pronunciation of place names or of foreign words. It was agreed, however, that foreign words in common use should be Englished and that where their sounds approximated to English sounds the original sounds should be respected, e.g. chauffer [sic], and in proper names, Shoobert, but Mose-art, Reams (Rheims).

(Minutes, 5 July 1926; R6/201/1; emphasis in the original)

Subsequently, a BBC internal memo from Reith was sent to all station managers (‘Main and Relay’) with the minutes of the first meeting enclosed, adding:

I shall be glad if you will make every endeavour to have the decisions of this Committee carried out by all station [sic] who announce or speak in any way at the microphone. I am not of course referring to outsiders or even to regular lecturers. We are only concerned with our own staff.

There will of course be no difficulty with the pronunciation of the ‘r’ in Scotland. The ‘r’ should be pronounced but we would probably be quite unable to have Englishmen pronounce the ‘r’ without exaggeration and we wish to avoid stilted announcing even in an attempt to become more accurate. (17 July 1926, R6/196/1)

That the Committee’s decisions were not followed by all announcers all the time is palpable; that there existed and exist pronunciation variations even within RP or near-RP is a linguistic fact. A BBC internal memo by the Programme Executive sent to ‘all regional and station directors’ almost three years after the Committee’s first official meeting, with a reprint of the ‘general principles’ enclosed, is ample testimony: ‘I should be glad if all members of your staff who appear before the microphone would study it [the reprint with the general principles] and if you would impress upon them the importance that is attached to the adoption throughout the Corporation of a universal method of pronunciation’ (7 March 1929; R6/196/3).

In the next meeting (held on 8 November 1926) it was recognized that the spelling ‘eh’ for unstressed vowels was unsatisfactory in the light of the decision that vowels in unstressed syllables should have ‘a flavour of their original character’; ‘eh’ was therefore substituted by the mark ‘\‘\’ over the letter; however, it was decided not to use special type, i.e. the phonetic
All the Committee’s rulings were, as a matter of routine, published in the *Radio Times*, whose letter pages at the time developed into a veritable forum for language prescriptivists and purists.

It should be added here that it is not always easy to interpret the Committee’s ‘decisions’ without the use of phonetic script. While most of the exam-

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There are dozens of letters addressed to the editor of the *Radio Times* complaining about the pronunciation of vowels in unstressed syllables (that is the shwa or even its elision), about the pronunciation of aspirated ‘wh’, of ‘r’ in all its forms from postvocalic to linking and intrusive, about the smoothing of triphthongs, and, of course, the treatment of foreign words. Here is an example of a letter dealing with four of those issues:

*Announcers’ English.*

[...] The announcers seem to find a lot of difficulty with the letters ‘r’ and ‘h’. Why should a word ending in ‘er’ be pronounced as if it ended in ‘aw’ or ‘ah’? Why put in an ‘r’ when it isn’t there? Such vulgarisms as ‘Indiar’ and ‘Australian rand Africa’ are painful. Why say ‘modden’ when the word is ‘modern’? [...] We also heard that the King had been ‘weeled’ in a bath-chair, when – I suppose – the announcer meant ‘wheeled’. Also, is it the British Empire or the British Empiah? If the B.B.C. pronunciations in the above instances are the correct ones, then I apologize for my ignorance. If they are not correct, surely listeners are justified in saying so. – F.W.E. Wagner, Castletown Road, West Kensington. (*Radio Times*, 28 June 1929)

The ‘wh’ aspiration question, incidentally, triggered months of controversy in the *Radio Times*, with quotations ranging from the *New English Dictionary*

18 Thanks to Peter Trudgill and John Wells for their help on this point (25 April 2001, private communication).

19 See Mugglestone 2003 on homophones (114–15), aspirated *w*/hw/ (186–8), vocalization of /r/ (86–9), and linking and intrusive /r/ (91–4).

20 As late as 1981, Burchfield, in his *BBC Guide*, recommended to ‘avoid the intrusive *r*’, at least ‘in the formal presentation of the news or of other scripted speech’ (10), even though this is a well-known feature (be it categorical or variable) of non-rhotic accents (Wells 1982: 222–7). Hughes, Trudgill and Watt (2005: 46) equally consider intrusive /r/ as ‘very much a part of RP’, but they add that ‘careful speakers and speakers of adoptive RP may [...] avoid it’. And Trudgill (2002: 174) lists intrusive /r/ among a number of ‘features which used not to be RP and now are RP’.
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21 Gimson (1984: 47) observed that ‘the phoneme /w/ as in white, […] although characterized as obsolescent by phoneticians a hundred years ago, was nevertheless often recommended as appropriate in more formal styles.’

22 The previous recommendation was of course, as is stated among the ‘general principles’ from 1926, not to anglicize the pronunciation of garage (see above).
injunctions of the Committee with regard to the so-called ‘purity’ of English vowels. (Minutes, Enclosure A; 20 September 1934; R6/201/2)

This is, in fact, another important point about the working mechanisms of the Committee. In spite of the fact that ‘in many cases the recommendations of the Committee involve a dogmatic decision on points which might legitimately be argued, but to prevent confusion uniformity has to be attempted’ (Radio Times, 16 July 1926), the Committee actually increasingly sought the public’s views and, not infrequently, took some of the criticism on board, and from the later 1920s onwards showed an increasing willingness to change some of its earlier decisions.

3. A ‘Listening’ BBC?

In the course of 1927, the Committee started drawing up its word-lists under two headings, one for words on which there was agreement, the other for words possibly to be revised later ‘in the light of criticism’:

(a) Pronunciations definitely recommended
(b) Pronunciations suggested

The former are to be adopted by the announcers, for example

- zoology: zoological
- zo-ology: zo-olojical, but Zu-lojical Gardens. 23

The latter, the suggestions, will be constantly reviewed in later meetings, when they might be changed according to suggestions received, for example

- again: The last syllable rhymes with either ‘rain’ or with ‘then’. The Committee suggests the latter pronunciation.
- cross: This, with other words like ‘frost’, ‘cough’, ‘loss’, is pronounced either with a short vowel as in ‘boss’, or a long vowel as in ‘all’. The Committee suggests the former pronunciation. 24

23 Probably because ‘Zulojical Gardens’ was among the pronunciations ‘definitely recommended’, it took ten years and half a dozen letters from Professor Julian Huxley of the Zoological Society to have this curious decision changed. Huxley – who had himself joined the Committee in 1935 – described the original decision as not only ‘contrary to [his] experience’ but a ‘travesty’ (20 December 1935, R6/196/8; 2 March 1937, R6/196/10). Finally, in December 1937, ‘The pronunciation of the word zoological was emended from zoo-olójical to ZO-ÓLOJICAL. The comment “but Zoo-olójical Gardens was deleted’ (Minutes, 7 December 1937; R6/201/2).

24 The Committee’s recommendation is that of General or Mainstream rather than Refined or U-RP, as it is the latter, particularly among older speakers, that prefers /ɒ:/ instead of /a/ (Gimson 1994: 108–9; Mugglestone 2003: 191; Hughes, Trudgill and Watt 2005: 49).
explosive Pronounced ‘explousiv’ and ‘explouziv’. No decision.\textsuperscript{25}

golf The pronunciation ‘goff’ is current in the South among players of the game. The Committee suggests the retention of the ‘l’ sound.\textsuperscript{26}

(Minutes, 26 May 1927; R6/201/1)

The minutes of a meeting in the following year state that, after a lengthy discussion of ‘doubtful words […]’, it was decided that these pronunciations should be published in the “Radio Times”, and that readers should be invited to submit their views’ (29 November 1928; R6/201/1). And in 1930 the Committee even went so far as to regard all its decisions on pronunciation as “provisional and [to] be published as such in “The Radio Times”, being given as much publicity as possible”. Then ‘these provisional decisions should be reviewed at the following meeting, when they would be either confirmed as final, or altered in the light of criticism received’ (17 January 1930; R6/201/1).

I should like to illustrate this new, pragmatic ‘listening BBC’ with two examples. The first concerns place names.

The Committee decided as early as its meeting of 8 November 1926 to produce a pronouncing dictionary of English place names that would be ‘of service to general learning, and of practical use to the B.B.C.’ The need for such a dictionary arose as ‘it was difficult to obtain information about the pronunciation of small villages, hamlets, etc.’ This had apparently led to some mispronunciation by BBC announcers, which had in turn led to ‘adverse criticism in the country’ (R6/201/1). Interestingly enough, it was in various letters to the editor of the Radio Times that the issue was first raised.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{25} Burchfield (1981: 10) equally advised BBC announcers to ‘avoid the use of the obsolescent -ors/-orf sound in words like cross, loss and off.’ And seventy-five years after the Committee’s recommendation, Trudgill (2002: 174) even speaks of “the replacement of /ɔ:/ by /o/ in the lexical set of lost, cloth, off in RP.

\textsuperscript{26} Only Jones (1977: s.v.) still lists the voiceless and the voiced variant of the alveolar fricative here; the Oxford English Dictionary (s.v.) as well as Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (1999: s.v.) and New Penguin English Dictionary (2000: s.v.) have /s/.

\textsuperscript{27} In the letters page of the issue of July 30 1926, for example, two listeners questioned at least some of the Committee’s decisions on the pronunciation of place names, but one in particular, Edgar W. Wood, a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, may well have given the Committee the idea of working on the matter.
In the spring of 1927, ‘a card index of some nine hundred place names, with their pronunciations, had been compiled from information received from listeners in the country’. Reith suggested that the BBC should verify that information, so that announcers could be advised with confidence to consult the card index for the pronunciation of difficult place names (26 May 1927; R6/201/1). The minutes from the December meeting of 1927 record not only that the Station Director at Edinburgh requested information about the place name index – thereby clearly reflecting its usefulness – but also that the Committee did in fact verify every single entry in the index (1 December 1927; R6/201/1); this was done by writing a circular letter to educated people in ‘all villages the names of which were contained in the card index’, such as postmasters and country vicars, and asking them to confirm or correct a particular pronunciation (17 May 1928; R6/201/1). A staggering ‘1,946 letters had been sent out, of which [only] approximately 5 1/2% were unanswered’ (Minutes, 29 November 1928; R6/201/1).

But the place name consultation process undoubtedly reached its climax in 1929 with a full-page appeal in the Radio Times by Lloyd James. He wrote that ‘several hundreds’ of letters had already been received about place names with unfamiliar pronunciations, ‘but more are required’ (Radio Times, 3 May 1929). The reactions were overwhelming, and three weeks later, the Radio Times had to publish the following statement:

Pronunciations of Place Names.
Mr. Lloyd James has received so many letters in reply to his request for place-names of strange pronunciation that he is unable to reply to them all individually. He promises, however, to communicate in due course with those correspondents who raised special points. A listener has taken exception to our spelling the local pronunciation of ‘Daventry’ as ‘Dainty’. This, she says,
should be ‘Dane-tree’. Daventry was the scene of the last stand of the Danes; and the town’s crest is a ‘Dane under a tree’. We thank her for this information, which was new to us. The next time we see a Dane under a tree anywhere, we shall think of Daventry. (‘Both Sides of the Microphone’; Radio Times, 24 May 1929)

So should the place of the BBC station and transmitter in Northamptonshire be called ‘Daintree’ – its historical local pronunciation – or ‘Daventry’, its current spelling or ‘phonetic’ pronunciation? The question had in fact already arisen more than four years earlier, when Lloyd James had given a firm ruling: ‘The B.B.C. has, I think, sufficient authority to decide which pronunciation it will adopt. Let it be Daventry’ (Lloyd James to Reith, 21 July 1925; quoted by Briggs 1995a: 222).

An undated report on the progress with respect to the Dictionary of Place Names (R6/196/1) states that 1,500 letters and postcards were received as a result of the appeal in the Radio Times and that an additional 1,778 new names had been added to the Register, ‘of which 1,400 appear to be suitable for inclusion in the pamphlet (the remainder being merely dialect pronunciations). This, with the 554 names already on the Register, makes a total of 1,954 names (England only) suitable for publication, if the replies from parsons and postmasters prove satisfactory.’

The Minutes of the seventh meeting of the Advisory Committee, held on 25 July 1929, record that the ‘question of alternative pronunciations was discussed’ and that ‘it was decided that one pronunciation only should be recommended for Announcers, but that accepted local pronunciations which are still in general use should be given in a separate column.’ This was an important novelty, even if only applied to place names, as all previous calls for alternative pronunciations had been rejected. It was further decided – and this is another sensible, far-reaching novelty – ‘that pronunciations should be given in phonetic script, but that a popular notation should also be given. It was suggested that the International Phonetic Script should be used’ (R6/201/1).

Of course the main work was done by the Committee (and particularly a three-member sub-committee specifically set up for the purpose; it consisted of Daniel Jones, Lloyd James and J.C. Stobart, the Director of the Education Department (R6/201/1)), but the input from listeners and the general public should not be underestimated. The result was impressive. The pamphlet Broadcast English II: Recommendations to Announcers Regarding the Pronunciation of Some English Place Names, published by the BBC in 1930, contained ‘some 1500 English names, a few Manx names, and one or two Welsh names from border counties’ (5), as well as an Introduction out-

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28 For an overview of the Broadcast English series of pamphlets see below, p. 239.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dalby, Leicest.</td>
<td>də:li:bi</td>
<td>dáwbly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalby, Lincs.</td>
<td>də:li:bi</td>
<td>dólby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallington, Sussex</td>
<td>də:lɪŋtən</td>
<td>dəllɪŋtʊn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damems, Yorks.</td>
<td>dæ:məmz</td>
<td>dəmməms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darenth, Kent</td>
<td>də:renθ</td>
<td>dərənth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daresbury, Ches.</td>
<td>də:rzəri</td>
<td>dərzəburɨ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwen, Lancs.</td>
<td>də:rwən</td>
<td>dərwən</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davenham, Ches.</td>
<td>də:vənəm</td>
<td>dəvənəm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daventry, Northants.</td>
<td>də:vəntrɪ</td>
<td>dəvəntrɪ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debach, Suffolk</td>
<td>də:bidʒ</td>
<td>dəbbɪdʒ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deighton, Yorks.</td>
<td>dɪ:tən</td>
<td>dɛtən</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delabole, Cornwall</td>
<td>də:lobəl</td>
<td>dəlləbəl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delamere, Ches.</td>
<td>də:lmər</td>
<td>dəlləmər</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dent-de-lion, Kent</td>
<td>dəndɪləiən</td>
<td>dəndɪlɪən</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denwick, Northumb.</td>
<td>dɪnɪk</td>
<td>dɛmɪk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deopham, Norfolk</td>
<td>dɪfəm</td>
<td>dɛfəm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby, Derby</td>
<td>də:rbɪ</td>
<td>dərbɪ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dereham, Norfolk</td>
<td>dɪəˈrəm</td>
<td>dɛrəm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deritend, Warwick.</td>
<td>dəˈrɪtənd</td>
<td>dɛrrɪtənd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derwentaugh, Durham</td>
<td>dəˈrəwenthɑːf</td>
<td>dɜːrwent-ʰaaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devoke Water, Cumb.</td>
<td>dəˈvɔk ˈwɔtər</td>
<td>dɛvvok ʰawtər</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon, River in Notts.</td>
<td>dɪˈvən</td>
<td>dɪevən</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devoran, Cornwall</td>
<td>dəˈvərən</td>
<td>dɛvərən</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dibden Purlieu, Hants.</td>
<td>ˈdɪbədən ˈpʊrljuː</td>
<td>dɪbdən pʊrləw</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 3: Facsimile Broadcast English II (1930: 36)
lining some general principles and explaining, in some detail, the ‘International Phonetic Alphabet as adopted for the representation of English pronunciation’ (13). As for Daventry, therefore, both pronunciations were listed (phonetic script / modified spelling), first the current pronunciation which was recommended to announcers ‘dævæntri / dævventry’, followed by the historical and local ‘deintri / dávntry’ (36).

The second example I would like to give relates to the pronunciation of the words ski and margarine. In the first, 1928, edition of Broadcast English I: Recommendations to Announcers Regarding Certain Words of Doubtful Pronunciation, the pamphlet in which the Committee’s findings for words of general parlance were published, the word ski does not figure; but the Norwegian and Swedish pronunciation, where <sk> before front close vowels is pronounced /ʃ/ was common in English at the time (see Jones 1924, 1937: s.v., who in both editions gives /ʃi:/ first, followed by the less common alternative /ski:/ in brackets). However, there was a constant stream of letters objecting to the pronunciation /ʃi:/ here is one from 1927:

‘Ski’ or ‘Shee’?
Dear Sir, – Would it not be as well if the B.B.C. Advisory Committee on Spoken English gave attention to that vexed word ‘ski’? When broadcasting some time ago from the Plymouth Station, I was informed by the Announcer that, so far as he was aware, the accepted pronunciation was ‘shee’. If the Norwegian pronunciation be adopted, then presumably the Norwegian plural, without the final ‘s’ should also be used: which I venture to think would ultimately lead to confusion. In any case, since the word is almost universally called ‘ski’ on the Continent, where the sport actually takes place, is it not somewhat absurd for us in England to adopt the sound used by the minority in Scandinavia? […]
F. McDermott, Tregoose, St Columb, Cornwall. (Radio Times, 16 September 1927)

The ski question – the word was borrowed into English from Norwegian – is directly linked to the treatment of loan words in English and, therefore, the question, as Lloyd James put it, whether ‘a foreign word has lived long enough among us to be given papers of naturalisation’, i.e. to be ‘Englished’; that, he said, was ‘for the Committee to decide’. Of course there are no objective criteria of ‘long’ or even ‘common use’, the condition given in the 1926 ‘general principles’. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (s.v.) there is an isolated early use of ski in English dating from 1755, but all the other early attestations are late 19th and early 20th century. But, after another three years of uncertainty, the Committee did decide: on 17 January 1930 the pronunciation ‘skee’ was adopted (R6/199/2), and on 7 February 1930 the Advisory Committee’s new findings were published in the Radio Times. This, however, was not the end of it. The complaints continued – now arguing for reinstatement of the pronunciation /ʃi:/ – and so did the discussion among Committee members. On 20 September 1934, the Committee there-
fore accepted ‘SHEE to replace SKI’, that is, to ‘de-naturalize’ the loanword again, so to speak, and thus to reverse the previous reverse decision (R6/201/2). The pronunciation ‘shee’, therefore, found its way into the second as well as the third edition of Broadcast English I.

The letter ‘g’ in the word margarine caused somewhat similar difficulties. Complaints ranged from letters in the Radio Times29 to a letter to the Committee from Unilever, the producers of Flora margarine, giving various reasons why the word margarine should be pronounced with a ‘hard “g”’, and asking that the committee should reconsider their previous recommendation ‘marjareen’.30

The colour-coded card index, which records the history of all the words discussed, lists margarine on a white card, which stands for ‘Ordinary words, included in 3rd edition of Broadcast English I’, and gives the following chronology:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates discussed</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29.11.28</td>
<td>‘majareen’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.9.34</td>
<td>Altered to ‘marjareen’ [i.e. stress as in Jones 1924, 1937: s.v.; note, by the way, that in both editions Jones gives /dʒ/ as the preferred pronunciation, with /g/ in brackets as the less common alternative]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.12.37</td>
<td>Word reconsidered at request of Unilever Ltd. (manufacturers of product), who suggested that g was required by derivation and usage. Committee did not feel justified in reversing previous recommendation. (R6/199/1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the consultation process was becoming more and more a two-way street, helped considerably, it has to be said, by the fact that the British public took an enormous interest in the BBC in general and English language issues in particular, the Committee was still somewhat reluctant to make the changes in pronunciation suggested by members of the public; time was to prove the Committee ‘wrong’ on ski and ‘right’ on margarine. As was the case with the place names, however, the Committee was surprisingly open when it came to the many words that listeners suggested to the BBC for a

29 ‘Half a Pound of “Marge”!’ The pronunciation of margarine, given in this week’s Radio Times should not be “marjareen”, but with a hard “g” margarine, as it derives from margaric acid, pronounced with the “g” hard. Marjareen has resulted in the awful contraction “Half-pound of Marje”. Dr. C. Gordon, Jersey. (Radio Times, 18 January 1928)

30 ‘The Secretary [Lloyd James] reported a letter received from Messrs. Unilever, Ltd., protesting against the Committee’s recommendation that the “g” in the word “margarine” should be soft, and urging that the form with the hard “g” was not only required by the derivation of the word, but was also in general use amongst educated speakers. After discussion the Committee decided that in view of the fact that the form MARJARINE was commonly used both by those who bought and those who sold the product there was not sufficient justification for reversing their previous recommendation. The Secretary was instructed to write to Messrs. Unilever to this effect.’ (Minutes, 7 December 1937; R6/201/2)
'ruling'; they received letters proposing everything from a list of 'correct' pronunciations of plant and flower names, chemical elements, the names of famous scientists or politicians to words relating to the Mount Everest expedition of 1931 – such as geographical and geological names (20 November 1931; R6/201/1).  

In spite of such apparent ‘openness’ to suggestions and ‘pragmatism’ in terms of decisions, the BBC still was, in many respects, frightfully upper-class, public school and Oxbridge. In the letter pages of the Radio Times (12 February 1932) a listener (the playwright and biographer St John Ervine) asked the meaning of the word nesophile, which he had heard in a broadcast but could not find in any of the dictionaries. To which the ‘Broadcasters who made use of the word in their account of Mr. Compton Mackenzie’ replied, obviously tongue-in-cheek but nonetheless rather high-handedly: ‘We apologize with horrid humility for having gone one better than the best dictionary. Our only excuse is a classical education. We derive the word, which means simply an “island lover” from the Greek noun nēsos “an island”, and the verb phileo “I love”. It is one which we have always used under the impression that it was supported by tradition.’ (In the actual reply, the Greek words are not transliterated, but in their original Greek script.)

Excesses like these – patronizing though they were – should not, however, tarnish the larger picture, namely that from the late 1920s onwards the BBC had started to pay more and more attention to the public’s suggestions for place names and words to be discussed and, in some cases (e.g. the original, 1930, ruling on ski), to the public’s views on the pronunciation of individual words. It was also clear, however, that the Committee remained the final authority on pronunciation; to abandon that would have meant to deprive the Committee of its raison d’être.

To recapitulate briefly: in its first dozen or so meetings, the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English achieved the following:

– it drew up general pronunciation guidelines for announcers and newsreaders;

– it drew up whole lists of words whose pronunciation was uncertain and made recommendations or suggestions for these;

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31 More specifically, the Committee received 27 letters relating to the pronunciation of the last name Joule, as in James Prescott Joule, the scientist (19 January 1933). Other letters were concerned with the words conduit and intuit. In the light of such correspondence, the Committee (30 November 1933) decided on the pronunciations ‘CÓNDEWIT’, ‘INTÉWIT’ and ‘JOOL’. And in 1936 (8 January) it was agreed that ‘the best method of obtaining opinions and suggestions from the general public would be to broadcast a request for assistance in a series of talks dealing with different aspects of the spoken language.’ (R6/201/1; R6/201/2)
– it implemented the compilation of a card index for the pronunciation of place names;
– it decided to publish its findings and, if necessary, revise them.

The last two points – as we have already seen in the case of English place names – eventually led to the publication of a series of enormously popular pamphlets, entitled *Broadcast English*:32

I. Recommendations to announcers regarding certain words of doubtful pronunciation (1st edn 1928; 2nd edn 1932; 3rd edn 1935; a fourth edition was planned in the course of 1938 but never published (Minutes, 28 June 1938; R6/201/2).)

II. Recommendations to announcers regarding the pronunciation of some English place names (1930)

III. Scottish place names (1932)

IV. Welsh place names (1934)

V. Northern Irish place names (1935)

VI. Foreign place names (1937)

VII. British family names and titles (1939)

An additional booklet on foreign personal names and titles, although extensively discussed and worked on in the course of 1938, never saw the light of day; the main reason for its failure was the lack of sensible, consistent principles for the selection of names on a global scale (Minutes, 28 June 1938; R6/201/2). The pronunciations contained in the 2nd edition of *Broadcast English I*, by the way, were recorded and published by the Linguaphone Institute.33

4. Changes and Suspension

On the surface, the Advisory Committee on Spoken English continued its work – in a fashion broadly similar to that outlined here, that is discussing lists of words of doubtful pronunciation and publishing and revising the *Broadcast English* series – until its suspension at the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. Below the surface, however, there were various difficulties, conflicts and crises; as a result of these, two important and wide-

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32 The minutes of 29 November 1928, that is immediately after the publication of *Broadcast English I*, record that ‘the attitude of the Press was, on the whole, favourable, and that the pamphlet had aroused considerable interest throughout the country’ (R6/201/1).

33 The final paragraph of the preface in the first edition was omitted and substituted with the following sentence in the second: ‘All the pronunciations contained in this booklet have been recorded on two ten-inch gramophone records which are published by the Linguaphone Institute’ (Minutes, 26 March 1931; R6/201/1).
ranging sets of changes in policy and structure were implemented over the years.

First, a kind of widening-up process: the accession of new members to the Committee came in two ‘waves’, the first of which was the result of the Committee’s first serious crisis in 1929, triggered mainly by the problem of irregular attendance of some members and decisions taken by majority voting in meetings where half of the members may have been absent. The second, bigger ‘wave’ of enlargement took place in 1934 and led to the creation of a permanent specialist sub-committee whose paid members – Professors Daniel Jones, Lloyd James and Henry Cecil Kennedy Wyld, since 1920 Merton professor of English language at Oxford University, and Mr Harold Orton, a dialectologist from King’s College, Newcastle, and former pupil of Wyld (ODNB 2004–7) – would make recommendations before the word-lists were put before the full Committee.

After its reconstitution in 1934 and other, smaller, changes, the composition of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English, that is, the ‘main’ committee, looked as follows by the winter of 1938: besides Lloyd James (still the Committee’s Honorary Secretary), Daniel Jones, George Bernard Shaw, Logan Pearsall Smith, H.C.K. Wyld, and Harold Orton the membership consisted of:

Professor George Gordon (Chairman) [a literary scholar, President of Magdalen College, Oxford and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University];
The Lady Cynthia Asquith [writer of memoirs and diaries; admired at the time primarily for her ‘unique blend of intelligence and playfulness’, social background and beauty; friendships with D.H. Lawrence, who depicted her in some of his works, and the playwright J.M. Barrie (ODNB 2004–7)];
The Lord David Cecil [a literary biographer and critic, former fellow of Wadham College, Oxford];
Sir Kenneth Clark [art historian, director of the National Gallery and surveyor of the king’s pictures];
Alistair Cooke [BBC Film Critic 1934–7, he was suggested by Lloyd James as he is ‘a very brilliant man who did English at Cambridge, got a Commonwealth Fellowship and did work on Dramatic Criticism for three years at Harvard and

34 The problems are outlined and enlargement is recommended in a seven-page document (most probably drawn up by Lloyd James) from the autumn of 1929. C.T. Onions, co-editor of the Oxford English Dictionary and reader in English philology at Oxford University, and Lascelles Abercrombie, a leading poet and at that time professor of English literature at Leeds, were invited to join the Committee (R6/196/3; ODNB 2004–7). The former eventually resigned under rather acrimonious circumstances (R6/196/4), the latter died in 1938 (Minutes, 8 December 1938; R6/201/2).
35 See e.g. BBC internal memo from Mary Somerville to Reith, dated 18 May 1934 (R6/196/5) or the minutes of the first meeting of the reconstituted Advisory Committee, held on 20 September 1934 (R6/201/2).
36 All biographical information, unless stated otherwise, has been taken from the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB 2004–7).
ENCL. B.

THE BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

REPORT OF CONSULTANT MEMBERS OF ADVISORY COMMITTEE
ON SPOKEN ENGLISH UPON (1) BROADCAST ENGLISH I
(SECOND EDITION) AND (ii) LIST OF WORDS TO BE
CONSIDERED ON SEPTEMBER 20th, 1934.

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The consultant members met at Broadcasting House on
June 22nd, 1934, and at Merton College, Oxford, on July 6th.
They considered, in the first instance, the Second Edition of
Broadcast English I, and reviewed, in addition, the decisions
taken since the publication of that edition. They make the
following recommendations:

1. That the pronunciation of the following words, as previously
   recommended, should be submitted to the committee for
   reconsideration:

   APPARENT    CHIROPTERY    CONDUIT    COURTEOUS    COURTESY
   PROFILE      RESTAURANT     TRAIT     WESLEYAN

2. That the following words should be referred to the Committee
   for reconsideration after more evidence had been collected as
   to their pronunciation in modern usage:

   ACOUSTIC    AMATEUR        DECOROUS    DISPUTABLE    DISPUTANT
   EQUITY       FUSELAGE       GARAGE      HUMOUR       ROUTE (MARCH)
   PROPHECY

3. That the pronunciations originally recommended for the
   following words should be withdrawn and replaced by the
   variants indicated:

   AERATED     AIRAYTED      to replace    AY-ERAYTED
   ALLIES       ALLIES        "      "     ALLIES
   BUFFET      BOUFRAY       "      "     BOUFRAY (b) As in French
   CAISSON     CAISSON       "      "     CAISSON
   CONTUMELY   CONTUMELY     "      "     CONTUMELY
   CORONACH    CORRONACH     "      "     CORRONACH; (a as in MAN)
   CURVET (n.) CURVET        "      "     CURVET
   EQUIPAGE    ÉQUIPAGE      "      "     ÉQUIPAGE
   HOMOGENEOUS HOMOGENEIUS  "      "     HOMOGENEIUS
   MINIATURE   MINNICHET     "      "     MINNICHET

Fig. 4: Facsimile BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English Minutes, Enclosure B; 20 September 1934; R6/201/2
Jürg Rainer Schwyter

Yale. He is an excellent phonetician, and very familiar with modern educated American usage’ (Lloyd James to Reith, 31 March 1935; R6/196/7); Cooke’s weekly ‘Letter from America’ could be heard on the BBC until just before his death in March 2004;
Professor Julian S[orell] Huxley [zoologist, formerly professor of zoology at King’s College, London; Secretary of the Zoological Society, popular science writer];
F[rank] L[auence] Lucas [author and classical scholar, fellow of King’s College, Cambridge];
Miss Rose Macaulay [novelist and essayist, Macaulay was also the author of Catchwords and Claptrap (1926), ‘which reflected the pleasure she derived from the English language and her insistence on verbal precision’ (ODNB 2004–7)];
Sir Edward Marsh (Representing Royal Society of Literature) [retired civil servant, who had closely worked with Winston Churchill in various Departments; patron of the arts, chairman of the Contemporary Art Society and council member of the Royal Society of Literature];
Emeritus Professor Sir H[erbert] J[ohn] C[lifford] Grierson [literary critic and scholar, formerly Professor of English at the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh];
S[amuel] Ratcliffe [a journalist and lecturer, suggested by Shaw as he is ‘very sensitive to shades of pronunciation, and he does a lot of lecturing in America and comes up against all the differences between spoken English and Spoken American’ (19 June 1934; R6/196/5)];
Dr. I[vor] A[rmsstrong] Richards [lecturer in English at Cambridge University, later professor at Harvard, well-known to linguists for his collaboration with C.K. Ogden on The Meaning of Meaning (1923) and, in the 1930s, on ‘Basic English’ (acronym for British American Scientific International Commercial)];
Dr. W[alter] W[ilson] Greg (Representing British Academy) [independent literary scholar and biographer, fellow of the British Academy since 1928];
The Rev. Canon H[arold] Costley-White (Representing English Association) [when nominated by the English Association, Costley-White was Headmaster of Westminster School; he later became Dean of Gloucester (Who Was Who 1979)];
Sir Kenneth R[alph] Barnes (Representing Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) [head of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, knighted in 1938 ‘at the insistence of George Bernard Shaw, a firm friend and generous benefactor’ (ODNB 2004–7)].
(Memo, 31 October 1938; R6/196/10)

The second set of changes are of a more linguistic nature, namely the general introduction of the International Phonetic Alphabet (or IPA) in 1934, first used tentatively, as we saw, in the English place names booklet. As Lloyd James pointed out:
The early recommendation to record pronunciations only in the modified spelling system proved unsatisfactory, and a strictly phonetic pronunciation (using the International Phonetic Alphabet) was adopted in addition. This was first used in Broadcast English II. (Minutes of the first meeting of the reconstituted Committee, 20 September 1934; R6/201/2)

This change is clearly connected with the creation of the specialist subcommittee; the presence of more linguists, as well as the Committee’s increased contact with academics from overseas,37 scientists and scholars from other fields (such as law, music and art) not only helped to push through sensible measures like the use of the IPA, but also ‘ensured that the strict prescriptivism expressed by Reith in 1924 was to some extent mitigated’ (McArthur 1992: 110).

Finally, in 1937, we see the suspension of regular publications of the Committee’s decisions, decisions often reached by majority voting as, frequently, several pronunciations were found to be ‘equally good’. A statement by R.C. Norman, the Chairman of Governors, to the main Committee reads:

The Corporation […] now proposes that, since the public persistently misunderstands its motive in publishing a list of pronunciations recommended for the use of Announcers, it should no longer necessarily publish them in the ‘Radio Times’ and in the daily Press as a matter of routine. (Attached to the minutes, 29 January 1937; R6/201/2)

Instead, the BBC would only ‘give private instruction to announcers’ based on the specialist members’ reports and comments by the main Committee. Shaw was first in expressing dissatisfaction with routine publication of the Committee’s findings in the Radio Times. A day after the third meeting of the reconstituted full Committee of 28 November 1935 – a meeting which must have been little less than disastrous, as ‘decision after decision’ was carried by a majority of one ‘and in three cases by the casting vote of the chairman’ – he wrote to Reith as a matter of urgency: ‘I must advise the Corporation to reconsider its practice of publishing lists of pronunciations certified as standard on the strength of majority decision by the Committee.’ To which he poignantly added in a follow-up letter:

37 The Advisory Committee Minutes of 30 November 1933, for example, report an exchange of letters between Lloyd James and Professor George Philip Krapp of Columbia University in New York. Krapp – the author not only of the two-volume The English Language in America (1925) but also of popular handbooks like A Comprehensive Guide to Good English (1927) (Garraty and Carnes 1999: 901–2) – approved of Lloyd James’s suggestion ‘that an American Advisory Committee on Pronunciation might be formed to act in conjunction with the B.B.C. Committee, so that one Committee might co-operate with the other in ascertaining general usage in debatable cases.’ In the same meeting it was further suggested that ‘in view of the introduction of Empire Broadcasting steps should be taken to obtain the co-operation of authorities on pronunciation in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada’ (R6/201/1).
The new Committee, so far, is a ghastly failure. It should be reconstituted with an age limit of 30, and a few taxi drivers on it. The young people just WON’T pronounce like the old dons; and Jones and James, who are in touch with the coming race, are distracted by the conflict. And then, are we to dictate to the mob, or allow the mob to dictate to us? (2 and 3 December 1935; R6/196/8)

Not surprisingly, it was the author of *Pygmalion* who not only had a sense of linguistic reality but who also dared to confront some of the issues that lay at the heart of the Advisory Committee’s whole enterprise: that there is class and age variation; that therefore pronunciation would be difficult to fix; and finally, that actually very few people spoke RP or even wanted to speak RP. Modern estimates on the last point are somewhere around 3 to 5 per cent (Trudgill 2002: 171–2), though the percentage might have been a little higher in the 1930s, when, according to Milroy (1999: 186), the ‘accent requirement diffused downward’ to affect, for example, teachers and secretaries. Even so, RP was and is a minority accent. Shaw therefore recognized that anything beyond advising announcers on ‘place names and the like’ was doomed to fail.38

The political clouds over Europe darkened fast, and at the outbreak of the Second World War the Advisory Committee on Spoken English was formally suspended, although Lloyd James had ‘made a strong request that [it] should continue its work’ (18 December 1939; R6/196/11).39 However, it should be added here that the Committee had been running into the ground well before the War. This was due not only to a host of procedural difficulties, ranging from irregular attendance to near-resignations and deaths, but above all to differences of opinion between its more prescriptively and more descriptively minded members over the Committee’s purpose and function at large. The ‘validity’ of decisions reached by majority vote was also a constant problem, as illustrated by Shaw’s letter, particularly when such a vote went against the specialists’ recommendations, as was the question of generally admitting ‘alternative pronunciations’ – advocated by Wyld but rejected by Lloyd James, because ‘then a Committee is not necessary’ (29 March 1939; R6/196/11). With routine publication in the press suspended and research for and revision of the *Broadcast English* pamphlets firmly in the hands of Lloyd James and the other experts, the main Committee – a somewhat curious assemblage of language specialists on the one hand and pillars of (mostly English) society, but amateurs on matters linguistic nonetheless, on the other – had already become somewhat of an irrelevance in the latter half of the

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38 These and other changes (e.g. the creation of a sub-committee for the invention of new words) as well as their linguistic implications will be discussed in detail in chapters 3 and 4 of my forthcoming book, *The BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English, 1926–1939, and its Legacy*.

39 For an excellent account of the BBC’s wartime preparations, see Briggs 1995b: chapter VI.
1930s; it met for the last time on 8 December 1938, a full nine months before
the outbreak of the War (R6/291/2). Tellingly, it was not reactivated in 1945.40
Instead, the BBC-internal Pronunciation Unit was eventually to emerge in
the 1940s, with Daniel Jones as Chief Pronunciation Advisor, a role he kept
until his death in 1967 (ODNB 2004–7). The Unit’s much reduced responsi-
bility was and is ‘to give guidance to news-readers and announcers on the
pronunciation of place and personal names’ (McArthur 1992: 110).

Today, the BBC Pronunciation Research Unit, to use its full name, em-

ploys ‘three highly educated experts’ (‘Writeon’, BBC World Service, 17
February 2003, 18.45 GMT), whose primary concern still (and only) is consis-
tent and accurate pronunciation – rather than the promotion of a particular
accent or even a single pronunciation of common words with ‘rival forms’ –
of place and personal names, names of drugs and diseases, planets, festi-
vals, publications, and so on – in short, all types of proper names or phrases,
from any language, that BBC staff need to say before the microphone
(Catherine Sangster, BBC Pronunciation Research Unit, 18 November 2004,
private communication; see also Sangster, this volume). To achieve that,
they not only resort to their large database, the origins of which go back to
the time of the Spoken English Advisory Committee, but they also consult a
wide range of reference works as well as native speakers from the World
Service and foreign embassies (Writeon, BBC World Service, 17 February
2003, 18.45 GMT). The database is now computerized and accessible
online, complete with speech synthesiser, to all BBC staff; it contains over
200,000 entries and is regularly updated whenever new pronunciations are
researched, a process which results in roughly 50–100 new entries per week
(Catherine Sangster, BBC Pronunciation Research Unit, 18 November 2004,
private communication). Ahead of the 2002 Football World Cup, for example,
the Pronunciation Unit produced a special list in order to make sure that
commentators knew how to pronounce not only the names of the 800 play-
ers, but also the place names of the various venues in Japan and South
Korea (www.ananova.com/news, 14 January 2002). Besides the daily list of
news-related items, such special lists of pronunciations are prepared either
ahead of major sporting and political events, or they may be ‘themed lists’
(e.g. composers’ names) (Catherine Sangster, BBC Pronunciation Research
Unit, 18 November 2004, private communication).

Roach (2000: 5) remarks with respect to the BBC’s ‘excellent Pronuncia-
tion Unit’ that ‘most people are not aware that it has no power to persuade
broadcasters to use particular pronunciations: BBC broadcasters only use it

40 Note that Reith, who had created the ethos that led to the Committee’s formation, left the
Corporation in 1938 and Lloyd James, not only the Committee’s honorary secretary but also
its driving force, had suffered from ‘depressive insanity’ due to the ‘stress and anxieties of
war’ and committed suicide in 1943 (ODNB 2004–7).
on an optional basis [...]’ The role of the present-day BBC Pronunciation Research Unit therefore is to advise and recommend for the sake of accuracy and consistency, rather than to impose and prescribe in the name of a ‘standard form of pronunciation’.

5. Conclusion

So, what can we conclude from all this? First, we noticed a strict and dogmatic prescriptivism; the original intention was not only to achieve consistency among BBC announcers and newsreaders but also to educate the public through notions of what was – or was not – ‘good and correct English’; in short, to find and define the ‘best’ pronunciation, to fix and diffuse it, and thus create a uniform standard.

Then, more and more, we saw a kind of ‘listening BBC’, which regarded its decisions on pronunciation as largely provisional until proper feedback from an ever-larger circle of committee members, advisers and the public was received. Additionally, there was a slow but steady trend towards what could be called ‘linguistic professionalization’: the weight clearly shifted towards the specialist sub-committee; alternative pronunciations were admitted and eventually found to be ‘equally good’; the IPA was used routinely and the dogmatic press releases of the Committee’s rulings were stopped.

Was it all a failure then? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that the goals the Advisory Committee set out in its early mission statements – to fix and thus standardize spoken English by finding the ‘best’, ‘most correct’ pronunciation of ‘doubtful words’ and then, by the BBC’s ‘powerful example, endeavour to stem modern tendencies to inaccurate and slurred speech’ – simply could not be attained; phonology, as Lesley Milroy (1999: 173) has observed, is ‘particularly resistant to standardisation’. To give just one example, unstressed vowels: the Advisory Committee could neither stop ‘the loss of a post-tonic secondary stress in words such as territory, adversary, ceremony, with a consequent weakening of the vowel to /a/ and its frequent elision’ (Gimson 1984: 47) nor prevent the change from /t/ to /a/ in weak syllables, particularly after /l/ and /r/, as in angrily or merrily (Gimson 1994: 83, 99–100).

Language variation and change are undeniable facts, as is the focused
(rather than fixed) nature of even a reference accent such as RP – something the Advisory Committee only eventually came to terms with.43

It was not a failure in two other senses, however. First, the Advisory Committee played an important role in the emergence of a kind of ‘broadcast English’ or ‘broadcast style’ which – though allowing for some variability – nonetheless conveyed and still conveys a sense of ‘objectivity’ and ‘authority’ going far beyond the UK, particularly when it comes to news broadcasts.44 The Advisory Committee’s influence can be felt up to this day (most clearly when it comes to the generally ‘correct’, and therefore respectful, treatment of domestic as well as foreign place and personal names). In this respect, the early and pioneering work of the BBC in defining a style appropriate for broadcasting may be seen as somewhat parallel to the influence of printing on the written language, though the analogy is of course only a superficial one and, for the reasons outlined in §1, therefore should not be pushed too far.

And no, it was also not a failure in that it raised awareness of language issues among the population. True, every variation in pronunciation (or grammar for that matter) triggered and still triggers a flood of letters by the ‘language mavens’ (as Steven Pinker (1994: 370–403) has famously called them), but at the same time, the various discrepancies in pronunciation – be it between two newsreaders, be it between a newsreader’s pronunciation and our own – has made us think about notions such as ‘standard’, RP, and ‘correctness’ more than ever before. And this, I believe, is the other lasting legacy of John Reith and his BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English.45
6. References

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3. Other sources:


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