Spoken English and the BBC: In the Beginning

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Focussing on the period 1922–25, this chapter examines the formative developments which took place in terms of spoken English and the broadcast voice in the early BBC. Detailing the emergence of specific desiderata regarding accent, elocution, and speech-training, it traces the consolidation of the role of the ‘announcer’ (and the qualities of speech which were increasingly seen as both necessary and desirable for such a role). Looking in particular at the ways in which contemporary language attitudes, not least towards Received Pronunciation, impacted on changing criteria of acceptability, it uses archival documents from the BBC’s own history to explore the explicit engagement with issues of linguistic responsibility and norm.

It was language which almost curtailed the historical conjunction between John Reith and the newly formed British Broadcasting Company to which he was to be appointed as General Manager. As Asa Briggs relates, with reference to broadcasting, Reith ‘did not even know the word until he read a public advertisement in the newspaper of 13 Oct 1922’ (Briggs 1961, i: 35). It is an anecdote which succinctly confirms the pioneering nature of these early days of the BBC. Broadcast as a verb was largely restricted to agricultural contexts by the Oxford English Dictionary as it then existed (‘To scatter (seed, etc.) abroad with the hand’). Only in 1933 would the revisions of the OED Supplement by Charles Onions and William Craigie record a newly dominant sense, together with its allied forms: broadcast (v.): ‘to disseminate (a message, news, a musical performance, or any audible matter) from a wireless transmitting station to the receiving sets of listeners’; broadcaster: ‘a broadcasting company, station, or instrument; also, a person whose speech, performance, etc. is broadcasted’, with a date of first use in 1922; broadcasting (vbl. sb.): ‘the action of the verb’, a word given as originating in the same year.
Established as a company in October 1922, and making its first broadcast in the following month, the BBC would nevertheless swiftly impact upon the lexical landscape of English. ‘A language, strange in the ears of the unenthusiastic, is being spoken by growing numbers of people every day’, the Times noted in December: ‘It includes words like “valve”, “harmonics”, “rectifier”, and “condenser”, and schoolboys talk it with ease and understanding’ (‘Wireless Sets for Christmas’ 1922: 7). A new descriptive label also emerged for the variety of English which was most often to be heard on the airwaves; ‘BBC English’ or, as defined in the later OED, ‘standard English as spoken by BBC announcers’. It is this which, with reference to the very earliest years of the BBC – the days of ‘Company’ rather than ‘Corporation’ – will be the main focus of the present contribution.

‘Early days are crucial ones’, John Reith affirmed (1924d: 24). Reith’s diction of the pioneer (‘there is a great attraction in pioneer work: in knowing that no foot has trod this path before’ (1923: 139) suggests, of course, the image of an entirely blank slate on which radio – or, as it was then most often known, wireless telegraphy or the wireless – was to inscribe its new-found role. It was ‘a new thing; a thing that has never been done before’, wrote C.A. Lewis in Broadcasting from Within (1924: 1), comparing his initial role as Organiser of Programmes to being a member of Columbus’ crew, setting off on a voyage of discovery. The BBC ‘had, at the outset, no traditions’, likewise states Peter Eckersley (1941: 54). Appointed as Chief Engineer in 1923, the fact that Eckersley was, at this point, also the only engineer at the BBC merely reinforces what he describes as ‘our sense of pioneering a fascinating new development’ (Eckersley 1941: 57).

Nevertheless, in a variety of ways, this shared – and evidently popular – image of the blank slate was not, in fact, to be strictly accurate in either cultural or linguistic terms. Instead, the BBC was to intersect with a number of pre-established cultural agendas which would critically influence both the matter – and the manner – of broadcasting. A glance at the programming schedules from this period confirms, for example, the unselfconscious adoption of particular cultural norms (and the marginalisation of others) which came to govern both transmission and policy. Verdi, Tchaikovsky, Tosti, Wagner all featured during the evening (and sole) broadcast on 23 January 1923; Mozart, Mendelssohn, Schubert, and Wagner appeared on the following day. Educational talks on ‘Spider Babies’ or ‘the World’s Flight’ appeared in October 1923, alongside a regular feature on ‘Dramatic Criticism’. Shakespeare was likewise often in evidence, even in a broadcast output then restricted to five and a half hours a day.¹ ‘No better plays for broadcasting could have been written’, as Cecil Lewis opined (1924: 62). ‘In our pro-

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¹ Two hours of the broadcast schedule on 18 October 1923 were, for example taken up by lengthy extracts from Macbeth.
grammes we have definite ideals’, Reith declared in the Radio Times (which was inaugurated in 1923 as ‘The Official Organ of the BBC’); ‘we aim at communicating from day to day the best of the world’s thought, culture, and entertainment’ (Reith 1925: 1).

Reith’s evaluative diction was deliberate. As he endorsed in Broadcast over Britain, the emergent BBC was in no way ‘to be content with mediocrity’. Instead, Reith’s ideals of public service broadcasting rested in what he described as his ‘high conceptions of the inherent possibilities of the service’ (1924d: 32). ‘It is better to over-estimate the mentality of the public than under-estimate it’, he argued. Hence, while ‘it is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need – and not what they want, […] few know what they want, and very few what they need’ (1924d: 34). While the occasional, plaintive, voice of dissent can be heard (‘Do they think the majority of their “listeners” are really interested in such lectures as The Decrease of Malaria in Great Britain; How to Become a Veterinary Surgeon; [or] The New Rent Act?’ as a correspondent in Birmingham demanded (P.J. 1923: 12)), the early BBC would here remain resolute, insisting not only on the superior value of high culture but also on its transformative potential for individual listeners throughout the nation. An article in the Radio Times on “Highbrows” and “Lowbrows” by Percy Scholes (appointed as BBC music critic in 1923), is, for instance, emphatic on the value of the cultural opportunities thereby presented. ‘I don’t blame the Lowbrow too much for his lack of interest in the sort of music that needs listening to with brains’, Scholes wrote; ‘I know that it is not altogether his fault’ since, until the advent of the gramophone and broadcasting ‘the opportunities of hearing the higher kinds of music were few’ (1923: 439). The self-confessed ‘lowbrow’ was directed to read Scholes’ weekly column on classical music in the Radio Times, to listen to the symphonies and concerts described, and ‘he will find himself progressing until music that is at present frankly beyond his capacity of understanding will become to him comparatively simple’. For the dramatist John Drinkwater, radio was seen as establishing a new-found cultural divide, and a beneficial agenda of change: ‘People who do not listen at all prefer inferior music and the back-chat of buffoons […] The staple of popular entertainment, the banal ballads and drivelling patter and imbecile melodies, cannot survive the test of being heard and only heard […]. Here is a great enterprise that will show as it has never been shown before that to listen […] is to be intelligent’ (Drinkwater 1924: 486).

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2 As the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography confirms, Scholes ‘was undoubtedly among the first to see the educational potentialities of broadcasting’ (J. O. Ward, ‘Scholes, Percy Alfred (1877–1958)’, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35971).
Similar hierarchical models could impact on language, especially in terms of the distribution (and roles) allotted to standard and regional varieties on the airwaves. Here too broadcasting encountered a range of pre-existing conceptions, not least in terms of voice and the recommended mode of speech. Language – and linguistic variation – were by no means value-free in the early twentieth century. Instead, popular language attitudes were pervaded by wide-ranging assumptions about class, correctness, ‘educatedness’, and ‘culture’. George Bernard Shaw – later to be a member of the BBC Committee on Spoken English (see Schwyter, this volume) – had, for example, recently focussed popular attention on images of linguistic difference in *Pygmalion* by means of the transformation of the Cockney flower-seller Eliza Doolittle. Initially described as a ‘draggle-tailed guttersnipe’ who utters ‘such depressing sounds that she has no right to live’, Eliza Doolittle emerges into a temporary duchess with perfect propriety of phoneme and standard grammar, a linguistic as well as social metamorphosis. By means of Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, Eliza sheds ‘the accent that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days’ (Shaw 1916: 115).

The Newbolt Report on the Teaching of English in England, published one year before the establishment of the BBC, was still more trenchant in its insistence on the social, cultural, and educational value of certain varieties of English above others, and on the needful acquisition of such varieties as a marker of education *per se*. As it made plain, ‘systematic training in the sounded speech of standard English, to secure correct pronunciation and clear articulation’ should henceforth be seen as a vital component of education (see Mugglestone 2007: 256–7). Even though the Newbolt Report occupied the ostensibly neutral territory of an official treatise, the attitudes to language which it revealed were often transparently filtered through discourses of prejudice and preconception in which a non-localised standard English – in both grammar and accent – was equated with civilization and intelligence. Regional marking was conversely constructed as a ‘perverted power’, and laden with images of corruption and cognitive deficiency. ‘If children are not learning good English, they are learning bad English’, the Report hence stressed in a firmly articulated dyad. Language – and linguistic variation – was made to operate within a prescriptive (and proscriptive) space where the role of the teacher was explicitly to combat ‘the evil habits of speech contracted in home and street’ by means of the systematic inculcation of ‘proper’ English.

Given the pervasiveness of this kind of ideological framing, both inside and outside the school, it was perhaps inevitable that here too broadcasting would enter a fraught area of cultural debate. Conjectures about the ‘ideal “wireless voice”’ – and its standardizing potential – were raised in the *Times* even before Arthur Burrows made his inaugural transmission for the BBC on 14 November 1922. ‘A good pronunciation of standard English, it is hoped,
will be insisted on’, readers were informed in April of that year, likewise being vouchsafed the opinion that the presence of a strongly regional or local accent was to be discouraged (‘The “Wireless Voice”’ 1922: 13). Once broadcasting began, the educational remit of the early BBC was often perceived by its listeners as being equally applicable within this domain too. A letter headed ‘Wireless as the “Elixir of Life”’, published in the Radio Times (S.C.S. 1923: 163), unites elocution, education, and the prevalent discourse of opportunity in its praise for the ways in which broadcasting had brought ‘a wonderful means of education for our young people as well as us older ones who, living in remote country places in the last half century, had no opportunity of hearing good music, excellent elocution, or the thousands of interesting things which make up the everyday life of some of our fellow men’. Other articles closely echoed the Newbolt Report in their characterization of the linguistic ills of the nation, though it is notable that broadcasting, as well as the school, is now made the source of appropriate remedy and instruction. E.V. Kirk, of the West Ham Education Committee, for instance, discoursed eloquently on the ways in which ‘the environment in which many children are placed, often undoes the patient work of the teacher’. Like the authors of the Newbolt Report, he berated the ‘faulty pronunciation and bad colloquialisms heard in the street life and home life of children’ which, he added, ‘are difficult to eradicate during the few hours a child is at school’ (1923: 20). For Kirk, however, this was only to suggest the superior potential of broadcasting as an agent of standardization. It was radio, he argued, which now brought new opportunities and ‘a new influence to bear for the good in this respect’:

The result is working itself out in many agreeable ways. The pronunciation of their words shows an improvement that is, in some cases, very distinct. Many children whom I know personally are overcoming the defects of their accent by studiously attempting to imitate the pronunciation of “Uncle A.” or “Uncle B.” Fortunately, these gentlemen set a standard that will benefit any child who can reach it, and the result will be a purer English spoken by those whom they influence. (Kirk 1923: 20)

The paradigm thereby established is one of beneficial emulation, based on the accommodation towards what is depicted as the evidently desirable speech style – and perceived authority – of the presenters on the ‘Children’s Hour’ (the ‘Uncles’). Kirk’s vision of the BBC as a kind of Pygmalionesque Henry Higgins for the nation was to find a number of counterparts elsewhere. ‘Improving Our Speech’, for example, appears as a prominent sub-heading within another article in the Radio Times based on an interview with the novelist A.S.M. Hutchinson. He commended, in particular, the way in which the BBC brings home ‘the cultural value of the spoken word’ (in a form of words which, of course, serves to endorse the implicitly positive cultural meanings of certain styles of speech). This was made further explicit in Hutchinson’s subsequent praise for ‘the fine modulation, the correct pronun-
cation, the precise and often musical intonation of the official announcers’ ('A Novelist's Thoughts on Broadcasting' 1924: 61). Moreover, just as Scholes had stressed the transformatory role of broadcasting with reference to the musical capacity of listeners, so too, Hutchinson argued, could – and should – 'good' spoken English on the airwaves act as a similar agent of change. Hence, while Hutchinson lamented that 'speech is pretty dreadful nowadays', radio gave grounds for a new sense of optimism: 'I believe people are very ready and willing to take pattern by the best models. Your broadcasters can do that'. William le Queux, another highly popular novelist, endorsed the same hierarchical positioning of language and variation (and overtly qualitative metalanguage) in an article headed 'Announcers as Teachers'. 'Happily for us', he declared, '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 [...]. We look upon our announcers as teachers. And they are' (le Queux 1924: 151).

Of course, regional varieties could also be heard on the early BBC. 'I cannot tell how delighted I was to hear my own countrymen talking', as the London-based Mrs L.C. wrote after listening to the Aberdeen station (L.C. 1924: 390). Likewise, on 25 January 1924, on the Manchester station, one could hear James Worsley ('Dialect Entertainer') delivering a spiel on 'How Billy Armitage Geet a Neet's Lodging', while 'A few impersonations in various dialects of people reciting a nursery rhyme before the microphone' featured on May 2nd. 'Our Lizzie' (Helena Millais) was another popular performer, with a fusion of comedy and regional characterisation. Nevertheless, here too pre-existing cultural stereotypes could come into play, consolidating – as in Millais's work – an established link between comedy and dialect, particularly when seen from metrocentric perspectives. 'Except when it is used to produce a comic effect, dialect finds no place in the broadcast programme', Edward de Poynton argued, further endorsing perceptions of this kind (1924: 5).

Such socio-cultural patterning was epitomised to good effect in a cartoon which appeared in the Radio Times on 23 November 1923. Here an image of a woman laughing uproariously while facing the radio is accompanied by the caption 'Auntie (listening for the first time, after a humorous dialect number): "That's the first time I've ever laughed without any idea what I've been laughing at".' The presence of regionality on the airwaves could moreover be subject to some interesting conjunctions within the programme schedules; a recital of Scottish folksong on the Edinburgh Relay Station in May 1924 was, for instance, immediately followed by a talk by the elocutionist Augustus Beddie on 'The Speaking Voice'.

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3 Regional broadcasting could flourish elsewhere, as on the Northern Programme (see Briggs 1991: 165 ff.). Nevertheless, as Briggs also contends, Reith's interest in centralization, and
implicit forms – was also to be provided by the early BBC. This, however, was evidently seen as a matter for serious attention rather than comic response. ‘One foresees the possibility of a delicate and subtly modulated art of speaking, such as is to-day practised only by a few individual performers’, as William Archer (a ‘distinguished drama critic’) expounded in this context, stressing the centrality of voice to radio broadcasting (1924: 418). Like many others, Archer saw the cultural didacticism of the early BBC as the linchpin in a brave new world of articulatory endeavour and reform. After all, as he stressed of the exemplary elocution of the BBC, ‘should this art come into being, and become popular, it ought to have an excellent effect on the speaking of English throughout the world. People whose ears are thoroughly accustomed to clear and cultivated speaking will unconsciously imitate it, and will come to dislike the inarticulate slovenliness, not to mention the tell-tale local intonations, of everyday talk’ (Archer 1924: 418).

Archer’s words – like those of le Queux and Kirk – reveal, of course, the operation of subjective inequality, mapping perceptions of deficit, ‘slovenliness’, or regionality (the ‘tell-tale local intonations’ mentioned by Archer) at one end of a scale of differential values. At the other end – equally subjective if more positively validated in popular language attitudes – were the ‘cultivated’, ‘educated’, and non-localised tones of men such as the ‘golden-voiced’ Arthur Burrows (see Eckersley 1941: 13) who was an ‘Uncle’ on the Children’s Hour as well as regularly reading the news. ‘My father […] had a good, clear broadcasting voice with the absence of any regional accent. ‘B.B.C. English’,’ as Burrows’ son later noted (BBC WAC S236/12/Burrows).

Here too, just as for classical music, the democratization of access enabled via the airwaves was regarded as particularly important. ‘British broadcasting is a practical application of democracy’, as Reith proclaimed (1925: 1). And a significant part of this, at least for many who wrote about radio and radio transmission at this time, was the national access which was thereby also provided to the elite speech styles of Received Pronunciation (RP) which had hitherto been described only by means of the laborious notation of pronouncing dictionaries or in attending lessons in elocution (see Mugglestone 2007). As Burrows’ son confirms, this was indeed ‘B.B.C. English’ as it came to be known and recognised over the succeeding decades.

In wider cultural terms, as we have seen, broadcasting in the early twentieth century was often regarded as an active force for ‘raising up’, a notion which itself presents an interesting antithesis to the ‘dumbing-down’ which is a prevalent concern in more recent comments about the influence of radio
and television. Many writers, for example, stressed the heightened consciousness of speech – and an accompanying sensitization to notions of accent deficit as well as accent difference – which appeared to result from the centrality of voice in broadcast transmission. ‘The listener, wherever he may live, hears the announcements, the news bulletins, the talks, given in “Standard English”’, Edward de Poynton observed; ‘He hears great statesmen, famous scientists, noted literary men speak.’ Even if the names of such personages had previously been familiar to listeners, as Poynton continued, the act of reception via radio was capable of effecting a significant shift in perception: ‘Now their actual voices come to his ears and he notices the way in which they speak. He marks the absence of local accent and of dialect words […]. Our imaginary dialect-speaking listener realises that his is not the language of the great men he admires’ (Poynton 1924: 5).

Normative images of English on the airwaves were, by extension, often depicted as being part of a hegemonic process by which broadcasting might indeed foster and achieve a new linguistic uniformity, based on a top-down model of change. While Poynton also admitted that ‘local patriotism’ played a strong role in maintaining regional markers, the fact remained, as he concluded, that regionality is ‘a handicap to the man who wishes to rise in the world’ (1924: 5). ‘To correct debased speaking is now one of the recognised tasks of education’, O.E. likewise acknowledged in a letter to the Times, making explicit the value of broadcasting in this respect: ‘why not advocate taking advantage of the greatest opportunity there has ever been – an improvement in the language of wireless broadcasting?’ (1923: 8). He urged stronger regulation of the broadcast voice, and the elimination of ‘regional taint’ from the airwaves – an important consideration, he added, ‘when twenty or thirty speakers can influence half a million “listeners-in” every day of the week.’ As this indicates, popular language attitudes at this time could openly give credence to assumptions that instruction in ‘proper’ pronunciation was rightly part of that ‘duty’ and ‘responsibility’ of the BBC which regularly featured in Reith’s mission statements as Managing Director of the BBC.

It is, of course, tempting therefore to assume an equally active – and deliberately normative – policy at work in this respect within the early BBC. Nevertheless, it is important here to remember the reality of working practices in an era in which fundamental questions about how to broadcast, at its most pragmatic level – as well as what to broadcast – dominated discussion. The BBC in its earliest days in 1922 consisted, for example, of just four employees – none of whom was a specialist ‘announcer’ (‘In broadcasting by wireless telegraphy, the person who announces the subjects of a programme and the items of current news’, as the OED later confirmed in a new sense-division added only in the 1933 Supplement). Even Arthur Burrows, the man whose voice inaugurated broadcasting on the BBC as he read the results of the general election in November 1922, was not, in fact, an ‘announcer’ or
‘broadcaster’ *per se*. Instead, though he was indeed to be heard introducing programmes, delivering the daily news, or acting as an ‘Uncle’ on the Children’s Hour, Burrows was formally employed as Assistant Controller and Director of Programmes. In a similar way, ‘Uncle Peter’ was the Chief Engineer, Peter Eckersley, who was also to be heard announcing programmes, as was Stanton Jeffries, whose official title was the musical director of the BBC (and who also regularly participated in the Children’s Hour as ‘Uncle Jeff’). This flexibility (‘the personal familiarity of the early pioneering days’, as it was described by Hilda Matheson (1933: 54)) characterised the early, multi-tasking BBC, and linked it to even earlier, pioneering days of British broadcasting, such as the regular half-hour weekly broadcasts from Writtle which had begun in February 1922, or the 2LO transmissions from London broadcast from May of that year (and on which Burrows had done most of the announcing, as well as using a set of tubular bells to mimic the chimes of Westminster). The eventual demise of this early, informal, broadcasting style was to be regarded with a certain regret, and definite nostalgia, by a number of those who wrote memoirs of this time. ‘Great days! Not easily forgotten’, as Lewis described the spontaneity, flexibility, and ‘hand-to-mouth existence in programme organization’ which characterized the beginning of the BBC (Lewis 1924: 37).

The emergence of the BBC announcer – as an occupation for which specific training was required, and for whom particular desiderata in terms of language were also to be applicable – was, in itself, to be a significant element of this transition. Burrows notes that the first announcer as such was appointed in late 1923, almost a year after the first BBC broadcasts were made. It was only in 1924, however, that a further development was introduced by which the announcer assumed a formalised role at every station, with a new stress on the perceived importance of the function he was to discharge. Even in general terms, it is clear that a new – and normative – consciousness of language starts to appear around this time within the BBC. It was in 1924, for example, that Reith actively sought to curtail the variability in the tense marking of the verb ‘to broadcast’. This ‘needs to be settled once and for all’, he informed readers of the *Radio Times:*

> We decided many moons ago, and in our correspondence internal and external gave effect to that decision, that the rulings which apply to the verb ‘to cast’ should also hold with ‘broadcast’. Hence ‘I have broadcast,’ not ‘I have broadcasted’. [...]. The effects of quiet example are evidently not sufficient. All over the place one’s eye and ear are offended by the unpleasant suffix. (Reith 1924b: 305)
‘Please don’t do it’, he concluded, in an active injunction for future – and ‘corrected’ – language practice. The established collocation ‘listener-in’ attracted a similar impulse towards regulation, being described by Reith as ‘another horror which continues to be perpetrated’ (1924b: 305). He favoured ‘listeners’, though it is clear that contemporary ‘listeners-in’ could maintain a certain defiance in this respect. ‘For some obscure reason the B.B.C. has taken a violent dislike to the term “listener-in,” although many of their own artistes and quite 90 per cent. of wireless enthusiasts make use of it’, L.A.L.H. countered: ‘to my mind, it expresses concisely and precisely what it is intended to convey. If one says, “Did you ‘listen’ last night?” in nine times out of ten the reply would be, “To what?”’. But “Did you listen-in last night?” instantly suggests wireless’ (L.A.L.H. 1924: 527).

Within the BBC, pronunciation – and the matter of an accent appropriate for the airwaves, especially on the National Programme – would likewise emerge as part of a range of explicit discussions about the standards which broadcasting should both institute and maintain. Concerns of a far more pragmatic kind had, for instance, characterised early debates about the modes of preferred delivery, especially given the tendency for /s/, /l/ and /θ/ to distort when transmitted on then existing wireless apparatus. Likewise an early article by Burrows, headed ‘Would You Like to Broadcast?’, dwells on the importance of clarity for the ‘broadcasting voice’ since ‘certain types of […] speaking voices transmit much better than others’, while neglecting the subject of pronunciation and accent altogether (1923: 154). In 1924, in contrast, attention was increasingly being directed towards the detailed regulation of spoken discourse, with particular implications for those who announced programmes or read the news. Internal BBC memoranda and correspondence can illuminatingly reveal the trajectory – and the consolidation – of these ideas. The formalization of the announcer as a vital component of BBC staff was first made, for example, in February 1924, in a letter sent by Charles Carpendale in London to Miller Craig, the Station Director in Glasgow. Here, in a language of explicit decree (which, by extension, also precludes dissent), Carpendale (the BBC’s Deputy Managing Director) informed Miller that ‘it has been decided that the staff of each station will be increased by an announcer whose primary duties shall be announcing nightly’ (BBC WAC R34/252/Carpendale). While it was acknowledged that Station Directors will, on occasions, still ‘require to announce’, Carpendale also emphasised that, in so doing, the style and manner in which this aspect of broadcasting took place was henceforth to be subject to stringent evaluation. ‘I want this announcing brought to a fine art as it is one of the most

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5 Principle and practice, however, continued to diverge for some time. It is notable, for instance, that the definition of broadcaster included in the 1933 Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary made use of ‘broadcasted’ rather than Reith’s preferred ‘broadcast’.
important parts of the programme’, Carpendale affirmed. As he added moreover, here acknowledging the force of current language attitudes and the sensitivities which these could reveal, ‘if it is not well done it tends to jar and annoy listeners more than anything else’.

A sense of internal standardization is clearly in evidence. By March, for example, a new stress on ‘uniformity’ of speech style, and the means for achieving this, is being debated: ‘There should be a best way’, Peter Eckersley recommended: ‘while one does not want to be dogmatic, I think uniformity would be a good idea’ (BBC WAC/R34/252/Eckersley). Some resistance to this proposal was expressed; Arthur Burrows notably registered his lack of support on the grounds that ‘it will tend to rob our several provincial stations of their individuality’, as he wrote in response to Eckersley’s circulated memorandum on 5 March 1924 (BBC WAC R34/252/ Burrows). Nevertheless the dominant thrust was now towards the conscious articulation of new – and linguistically specific – desiderata for a different breed of announcers. Statements such as that by which ‘Announcers at the Provincial Stations might with advantage be brought to London for a short period every year […] to share in the benefit of collective study and training with the London Announcers’ (BBC WAC R34/252/Fuller) reveal an intentional homogenization in this context within the BBC.

A new sense of the emblematic role of the ‘BBC voice’ is also apparent. The voice of announcers was salient in the presentation of ‘the B.B.C. itself, its policy and ideals’, Walter Fuller argued – a means by which ‘to build up in the public mind a sense of the B.B.C.’s collective personality’ (BBC WAC/R34/252/Fuller). By June 1924, the phonetician Arthur Lloyd James (a founder member of the later BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English) was being employed to deliver programmes about good English, and the importance of national varieties. And by November Reith was issuing fresh directives on the social and cultural make-up of the announcer, countering previously established perceptions that the announcer is ‘the most junior official of all, occupying a position of not much responsibility with no future prospects’ with a new emphasis on the social and linguistic significance of this role. ‘I should like it to be made clear to Announcers how important their position is’, he decreed (BBC WAC R34/252/Reith), specifying further that this importance resided in certain crucial qualifications of the good announcer: ‘Announcers should be men of culture, experience and knowledge, with’, he added, ‘good articulation and accurate pronunciation.’ By 1925 moreover, this has been further restricted to particular educational desiderata. A new requirement for announcers to have benefited from an education at a good public school – in an era in which Public School English could operate as a virtual synonym for RP⁶ – would in fact have

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⁶ See e.g. Jones (1917: §7) who selected ‘Public School Pronunciation’ as the reference model to be described in his English Pronouncing Dictionary (the ‘everyday speech used in
entirely excluded the ‘golden-voiced’ but state-educated Burrows, who was, in reality, the son of an Oxford college porter. As Herbert Greenhalgh confirmed in the *Radio Times* (1925: 103), in terms of announcers ‘our standard is constantly being raised. Attainments that would have satisfied us a year ago would not be considered sufficient now, and probably a year hence we shall be still more particular.’

In a further contrast to the informality of the early days, speech training and rigorous testing began to be employed to ascertain the suitability of potential announcers. Announcing was no longer something by which a convenient BBC employee simply spoke into a waiting microphone. Instead announcers came with specialised remits and training schedules, delivering non-localised RP as they addressed the nation. The fact that they did so while wearing dinner jackets (an innovation introduced at the same time) merely served to confirm their emblematic propriety. As Reith was able to confirm in *Broadcast over Britain*, by late 1924 it was indeed true that ‘we have made a special effort to secure in our various stations men who, in the presentation of programme items, the reading of news bulletins and so on, can be relied upon to employ the correct pronunciation of the English tongue’ (1924d: 161). Moreover, he now expressed the distinctly normative hope that the ‘travesties of pronunciation’ he had encountered throughout Britain – as well as the ‘handicap’ they gave to their possessors – might thereby be eliminated. ‘I do not suppose that any one wishes to go through life handicapped by the mistakes or carelessness of his pronunciation, and yet this is what happened’, he noted, adding too his conviction of the utility of broadcasting in this respect: ‘This is a matter on which broadcasting can be of immense assistance.’

There is, however, a sense, expressed by Carpendale, Reith, and a number of others who worked at the BBC that, initially at least, this shift in policy, and in active language practice, was on one level simply a response to the increasing sensitization on the part of listeners to perceived standards of spoken English on the airwaves. ‘Broadcasting both domesticates the public sphere and socializes the private one’, as Andrew Crissell has noted (2002: 9). This seems to be particularly true in terms of language attitudes, and the public consciousness of varieties of English which, while prominent on the airwaves, differed in conspicuous ways from those which were used by the majority of the populace. Comments made by Reith in this context can, for example, initially suggest a clear conviction of projected responsibility – of a duty which is acquired from the public rather than necessarily initiated by the BBC itself. ‘The responsibility of being looked to in many quarters as authorities in standard pronunciation is an interesting, if some-
what onerous, responsibility', as Reith wrote in the *Radio Times* in January 1924, one month before Carpendale circulated his own directives on the employment of announcers at all BBC stations, and the standards which they should maintain (Reith 1924a: 43). ‘Our responsibilities in this matter are obvious, since in talking to vast a multitude, mistakes are likely to be promulgated to a much greater extent than was ever possible before’, as Reith later affirmed in *Broadcast over Britain* (1924d: 161).

Cecil Lewis, employed at the BBC since the beginning, was to use an almost identical form of words as he too sought to analyse the changes and transitions which had taken place within the inaugural years of broadcasting: ‘It has often been remarked – and this is one of the responsibilities that are indeed heavy to carry – that the announcing voice sets a fashion in speaking to many thousands of homes’, he wrote. For announcers, he added, this increasingly meant that the broadcast voice: ‘should therefore be faultlessly accurate both in diction and pronunciation’ (1924: 109–10). Lewis constructed an eloquent image of the growing discernment – and discrimination – of the microphone in this respect. ‘We had been appointed guardians and attendants of the most voracious creature ever created by man – a microphone – which clamoured daily to be fed’, as he wrote with a certain degree of anthropomorphic licence: ‘At first it was satisfied with simple fare and a little of it, but as the days went by its appetite grew in the amount it wished to devour but also became fastidious in the extreme as to the quality of the repast set before it’ (Lewis 1924: 26). By 1924 it was, he concluded, ‘a most terrible and insatiable monster’. Hilda Matheson shared in this sense of shifting realisation. ‘The most pervasive and powerful effects of broadcasting are seen, not in music, but in speech’, she affirmed, adding: ‘it […] only slowly dawned on us that the new emphasis and importance given the spoken, as distinct from written, language is likely to have results that were never dreamed of’ (Matheson 1933: 58).

1924 was moreover the year in which the Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges (later to chair the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English) also made a number of important – and highly public – statements on the precise nature of the linguistic responsibilities of the BBC, as well as the means in which they should be implemented. An article headed ‘Pure English by Wireless’ assumed, for instance, a prominent place in the *Times* in March. Bridges’s prescriptive – and conservative – interests in language (his ‘concern for the future of English speech’, as it is phrased here) were already fully in evidence in works such as his 1913 *Tract on the Present State of English Pronunciation*, as well as in his status as a particularly active member of the Society for Pure English, a capacity in which, the article notes, he has ‘protested valiantly […] against the many degrading and disruptive influences at work’ in matters of linguistic usage. The BBC was, as the *Times* makes plain, deftly assimilated within these aims for reform, especially given Bridges’
conviction of its value for the dissemination of non-localised norms of speech. ‘None but good English speakers should be employed by the broadcasting agencies’, Bridges stressed. ‘Good’, of course, operates euphemistically here, signifying little about the moral status of broadcasters. Instead, it acts as a way of deftly – if covertly – excluding the regionally-marked (or ‘bad’). For Bridges, radio was to be a ‘paramount and Imperial means of national culture’ – an image founded not only in the increased access it provided to the canon of great writers but also by its potential for the strategic inculcation of ‘pure’ and national (rather than ‘local’) English. As the article concluded:

It is an inspiring idea that henceforth the voice that addresses millions, often on commonplace topics, shall come to be recognised as an exponent of the purest English […] surmounting all the inevitable differences of dialect – Southern, Midland, and Northern alike – might our wireless voice become the unlocalised and invisible paragon of English speech. (‘Pure English by Wireless’ 1924: 15)

The scene was already, in effect, being set for the emergence of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English in 1926 (which, chaired by Bridges, would issue extensive directives on the matter of broadcast English; see Schwyter (this volume)). The increased involvement of Arthur Lloyd James was a further important component in this explicit reorientation of broadcast language practice for the National Programme. While Lloyd James would later act as Secretary to this committee and, from 1938, would be officially recognised as linguistic advisor to the BBC, by 1924, as we have seen, he was already assuming a position of some authority as a broadcaster on matters of language, regularly appearing on the prime 9 p.m. slot in the schedules. Of still more interest, however, are the lectures on speech – and especially on standard pronunciation – which he was asked to deliver within the Company to the staff of the BBC in London. As a 1925 memorandum in the BBC archives records, ‘The gist of his remarks was, that taken over the whole area of the British Isles, there are many distinct dialects, and usually one which causes less offence to the majority than others’ (BBC WAC R34/587/1. Announcers’ Lecture). This education in language consciousness, and associated notions of ‘offensiveness’ (or otherwise) was received with careful attention. Lloyd James’ comments were indeed perceived to be ‘so illuminating and so helpful’ that he was asked to deliver another lecture on the same topic in June. This, however, was to be broadcast internally to all BBC staff over the whole country who were involved in microphone work, rather than being restricted to those in the metropolis. As every Station Director was informed, ‘arrangements should be made for all who are interested in any microphone work at your station to be present, not only Announcers and Station Directors, but perhaps persons outside the Company who assist in
dramatic productions or speak regularly from the Station’ (BBC WAC R34/587/1. Announcers’ Lecture).

This in itself, of course, serves as a strikingly unambiguous marker of the importance being given by 1925 to overt instruction in the matter of ‘proper’ speech within the BBC. Further confirmation, if any were needed, appears in the concluding statement of this memorandum, and the now overt acknowledgement that the matter of language standards is something in which the BBC is to be actively engaged: ‘We are daily establishing in the minds of the public the idea of what correct speech should be and this is seen as an important responsibility’. These words echo – but also succinctly reformulate – Reith’s statement of the previous year (see p. 209). The responsibilities once contemplated as a potentially onerous duty are, however, now made part of an explicit remit of what broadcasting should endeavour to achieve.

This was to be a central part of the thesis which Lloyd James had himself broadcast to the BBC, and which he continued to promulgate in later years. Given the discriminatory nature of then existing language attitudes, the solution, as Lloyd James argued, rested not in any endeavour to expose the ideological foundation of such ideas (and thereby educate listeners into the true nature of the prejudice which common value-judgements on ‘good’/'bad’ or ‘regional’/'pure’ speakers served to reveal). Instead, he advocated educating all speakers in the articulatory nuances of ‘standard’ or non-localised speech. As he expounded in an article in *Teaching World* in 1927, in an article headed ‘A B.B.C. Expert’:

> For some reason a man is judged in this country by his language, with the result that there is, broadly speaking, a sort of English that is current among the educated and cultured classes all over the country. It has its little local variations, but these are of no matter, and a man who has this sort of accent moves among the rest of his fellow country men without adverse criticism. This type of speech avoids both the lapses of the uneducated and the affectations of the insufficiently educated at both ends of the social scale.

As Lloyd James further specified, ‘it is the duty of the BBC to provide this sort of speech as often as possible.’

For Lloyd James, as for Reith, the educative – and exemplary – potential of broadcasting was therefore seen as vital. ‘The BBC is not content to be seen as a mere entertainer’, Reith had declared in an article headed ‘A Broadcasting University’ (1924c: 481). They were equally united in their sense of the pioneering potential of this new medium, though it was Lloyd James who most persuasively argued the cause of language standardization through the transmission of an authoritative norm of speech. An influential – and historically transformative – precedent was located in William Caxton. The printing press which Caxton had introduced to England in 1476 had, Lloyd James noted, been able to disseminate not only multiple identical
copies of the same work over the entire nation, but had also done so by means of a single written variety, the forerunner of modern standard English. It was this which had come to define modern textual practice in place of the multiple local variations of grammar and morphology, as well as spelling, which had previously characterised the manuscript culture of medieval England. If printing had, as Lloyd James argued, ‘fixed the shape of our visual language’, he envisaged a similar revolution at work by means of broadcasting or what was now eloquently redefined as the ‘speaking press’:

Wireless now broadcasts the spoken language, and its effects upon the spoken language will be very similar to the effects of the printing press upon the printed language. The fifteenth century saw the birth of the printing press; the twentieth century sees the birth of the speaking press [...] [which] may fix the shape of our aural language, and it will tend to standardize our pronunciation. (Lloyd James 1938: 30)

Broadcasting, like printing, was thereby increasingly conceived as the catalyst for linguistic change, enabling the transmission of a non-localised and authoritative norm. Though ‘this may not be achieved in our lifetime’ as Lloyd James warned (1938: 30), it was this which, in the brave new world which he foresaw, might ultimately secure equality of accent for all, eliminating regional variation and the geographical markers of identity. That this was intended to have a strongly normative – and corrective – role for all speakers is made plain in other comments which Lloyd James makes. Natural features such as elision and assimilation are, for instance, likewise viewed as in need of remedy: ‘the slurring of sounds, the missing of sounds, the untidy articulation of sounds, is as much to be condemned as dirty or untidy print with worn-out type’ (Lloyd James 1938: 115). It is an image of ‘good’ speech which tellingly underpins the classic stereotyping of the ‘clipped’ BBC enunciations of the first half of the twentieth century, not least given that Lloyd James also came to be responsible for the speech-training of announcers.

This, however, lay in the future, though it is in the critical period between 1922 and 1926 when the foundations for this conception of the exemplary and potentially transformative role of BBC English were laid, with increasing explicitness, both inside and outside the BBC. Nevertheless, equally clear at this date were further manifestations of that ‘spirit of English liberty’ which, as Samuel Johnson had already stressed in his Dictionary of 1755, would, in Britain, always impede a merely subservient deference to the promulgated norms of a language academy or similar institution. Indeed, while Johnson had aimed his comments at the Académie Française, in the 1920s a range of dissonant responses to the BBC as self-appointed language academy can be detected, especially as the Advisory Committee of Spoken English came into being. ‘May it not be, however, that in the highbrows of the B.B.C. we have a British Academy in embryo?’, demanded the North Mail and New-
castle Chronicle on 16 July 1926. It was the Manchester Guardian which was, in the following year, perhaps to have the last word. 'In self-expression, we are heretic all, proud of our dialects and our difference', it stressed, placing the standardizing endeavours of the BBC in a firmly critical context:

The B.B.C., it is true, has attempted to achieve a pact of pronunciation within these islands [...] [which is] in many respects a surrender to the slovenly and drawling speech of the Southern English.

As it concluded, ‘it will be promptly disregarded by all self-respecting speakers of the language’.

Pronunciation was, of course, to remain a more complex symbol of identity than either Lloyd James or Reith had envisaged. If the English of the early BBC provided an undeniable source of elite, non-localised models of enunciation, it was equally undeniable that other forces – especially those located in the covert prestige of the local and vernacular, as well as enforced by peer group pressures far removed from those of the BBC announcer – continued to influence both speech styles and language practice throughout the nation. Rather than the convergent and top-down remodelling which so many writers predicted as they listened to the regionally unmarked tones which featured on the National Programme, Received Pronunciation instead remained – then as now – the accent of a minority (variously estimated as being used by between 3–5% of the population). Indeed, instead of Lloyd James’ transcendent vision of a nation united in a single accent by means of the socio-linguistic correctives of the BBC, we might note, in the summer of 2007, a striking scarcity of this particular object of desire. ‘Where are the gels who can talk proper and pirouette?’, the Times asked on 23 July 2007, describing the BBC’s struggles ‘to find middle-class accents’ for the lead roles in a new production of Noel Streatfield’s classic novel Ballet Shoes which is set in 1930s London. ‘Producers no longer had time to play Professor Higgins to starlets’, it states; instead ‘Estuary English’ and, still worse, ‘mockney’ dominate the airwaves at the expense of RP.7

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1. Unpublished Files from the BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham:
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BBC WAC R34/252. C. Carpendale to Dr Miller Craig, 13 February 1924.
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7 The role of ‘Estuary English’ as a non-localised competitor to RP has been a subject of recent controversy. See Mugglestone (2007: chapter 8) and Wells (1994).
2. Other Sources:


‘As She is Spoke’. (1926). *North Mail and Newcastle Chronicle*. July 16.


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