

STANDARD SPEECH: THE ONGOING DEBATE

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Speech training is still a subject about which few people agree. Members of VASTA (Voice and Speech Trainers Association) sometimes ruefully comment that there is not even firm agreement amongst the members on how to pronounce the organizational acronym. It's that annoying first vowel: flat? intermediate? broad?

As the excellent video documentary *American Tongues*¹ amply demonstrates, in the real world of American society we all carry about with us our own set of complex stereotypes about other people's speech patterns. And all of us — ALL of us — somehow manage to stigmatize some other groups. Her Brooklyn accent causes too much distracting attention for the midwest clients of a young business representative, so she seeks the help of an accent-reduction specialist. Southerners think Northerners sound harsh and dismissive. African-Americans hotly debate the value and utility of Black American Speech. A woman with a strong German accent cannot understand why visitors find her "Pennsylvania Dutch" (read *Deutsch*) speech hard to understand, especially those southerners who really have an accent. In these days when sensitivities about language use are particularly acute, when one attorney in the "trial of the century" can accuse another attorney² of racist tendencies when a witness suggests the possibility of identifying an African-American by his accent, it is not strange that the more limited issue of speech training for the stage is not immune from these controversies.

¹ A video documentary by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker, produced by the Center for New American Media, 1988.

² Both of them African-American.

However, for American actors, especially those who wish to act in the classical repertoire, these issues do not seem limited or parochial; they are concerns that find their way into every rehearsal, every performance.

Any real discussion of standards for theatre speech in the future must begin with an awareness of where we are now. And where we are now depends on where we have been.

THE SOURCE

As a child in Australia, growing up in the 1860s and 1870s, William Tilley could not have dreamed that his destiny would be to define the sound of American classical acting for almost a century. For one thing, throughout his life he hated theatre.

Nor did his interests seem to impel him toward the United States. Certainly he could not have imagined that his primary sphere of influence would turn out to be, of all places, New York City. Germany, and German culture, were his models and his home for the study of human language and its sounds. After his university training, his subsequent philological training with Henry Sweet³ in England and Wilhelm Viëtor in Switzerland, and his membership, one of the first, in the International Phonetic Association during the 1890s, Tilley established a highly successful school in Germany teaching German language and culture to foreigners; its peripatetic existence carried it through several cities until it reached Berlin around 1905 at Gross-Lichterfelde where it became an internationally famous institute. The transplanted Australian—according to his student Bruce Lockhart, noted English author, diplomat, and spy—did “more for Anglo-German friendship than any man living.”⁴ The school catered mostly to English students who had already been through university in England, another of whom was the young Daniel Jones, whom Tilley introduced to phonetic study. Daniel Jones subsequently became arguably the most influential figure in English speech and dialect study in the first half of this century.

Residence at the Tilley Institute was not for the faint of heart, or brain, for that matter. University graduates who had slid easily through the tutorial system at Oxford or Cambridge were abashed to encounter Tilley's rather more demanding teaching methods. “Tilley ruled them with a rod of iron, and *taught them how to work*; they often didn't like his methods at first, but in the long run most of them came to have unbounded admiration for him,” enthused Daniel Jones.⁵ By the time Jones wrote this obituary for his friend

³ The model for G. B. Shaw's Henry Higgins, Sweet was the inventor of “Broad Romic” transcription, the basis of IPA phonetic symbols thereafter.

⁴ *Retreat From Glory* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1934), 274.

⁵ In *Le Maître Phonétique*, October 1935 [italics by the author].

and mentor in 1935, Tilley had long since shortened his surname to Tilly. With the focused attention to language sounds that ruled his life, Tilly changed the spelling when he discovered that the "ey" ending was confusing to German postal employees when he went to collect his mail at the post office and told them his name.⁶

Tilly's rigorous pedagogy became the stuff of legend. Marguerite DeWitt, one of his students after Tilly had moved to America, gives what may be Tilly's own picture of his Institute in Berlin:

In pre-War days on the Continent there was an at-core ultra British Institute, one that was run with the precision, regularity, and energy of the English Navy; one that was always on time, in order and at work. A British historian has said that one never catches the Navy napping! For many a year people came to Professor Tilly so that they might use the science as a means to their various ends. Students, teachers, professors, consuls, diplomats, actors, singers, authors, members of all professions came . . . As colleague, friend or acquaintance of leading international scholars in the modern language field, and more especially as a friend and follower of that master philologist, Henry Sweet, Professor Tilly was an enormous drawing card who in his own domain was in a position to turn aside all shirkers and poor workers.⁷

Shortly after the First World War broke out, Tilly's Institute was closed; his family—who worked with him—was dispersed,⁸ and Tilly was interned by the German government for a short period of time. He made his way to England and at the close of the war settled in the United States, where in 1918 he found a teaching position at Columbia University in the extension program. Here he remained for the rest of his career; he never joined the regular faculty of the university.

But Tilly attracted students quickly. He began to teach a large number of people who wished to master English as a second language. More and more his innovative methods of teaching phonetics attracted teachers in the public school system of New York City, women (for the most part) who in their view were trying to maintain acceptable standards of English pronunciation within a secondary school curriculum that still allowed for the active

⁶ They would have expected him to say "till-eye" [tɪləi].

⁷ In *Americanadian Euphonic Notes*, no date, but probably 1926–1928. Marguerite DeWitt, who wrote extensively on speech issues in the 1920s, had a fondness for portmanteau words, as the title of her irregularly published newsletter suggests. In addition to "Americanadian" and "Euphonic," Miss DeWitt characterized those who lived in the United States but refused to learn the proper pattern of English pronunciation as "Americanots."

⁸ According to Marguerite DeWitt (*Notes*), two of Tilly's daughters, Emily and Edith, went to China to teach English in Peking (Beijing).

teaching of speech, rhetoric, and forensics. Marguerite DeWitt described the process:

Just as Henry Sweet hued [sic] out great blocks of phonetic knowledge so has Professor Tilly taken these blocks and broken them into chips so small that they may in great part be passed on to children. He has done more than any other to promote the practical application of phonetics and has done it on a comparative basis — *using the standard form of a language as the foundation for work.*⁹

William Tilly considered himself a reformer, attempting to clear away the detritus of outworn teaching methods. And he was right. Phonetics itself, during the first three decades of this century, was still defining itself as a separate area of study. A crucial tool of the growing social sciences of anthropology — with its need to notate newly-discovered languages — and linguistics as it evolved out of the historical orientation of philology, phonetics was still searching for the ideal notation form. Tilly believed strongly in Sweet's "Broad Romic" as adopted by the International Phonetic Association, which had been founded in the 1880s by Frenchman Paul Passy.¹⁰

But Tilly went further. Because his particular area of interest was the proper pronunciation of English, he was a firm advocate of so-called "narrow" phonetic transcription, which essentially means a more detailed and precise form usually defined by numerous diacritic symbols. Anthropologists and most linguists rejected narrow transcription, preferring the "broad" or more general form because their needs did not require such specificity, and because they considered narrow transcription overly laden with detail. In writings critical of Tilly's approach, the word "fussy" appears more than once.

His attention to detail was influential, especially in areas of language study where Phonetics itself was new. But Tilly's chief reform, and the one that was passed down to his followers in theatre, was his attempt to teach the pronunciation of English as a *spoken* language, and not as a written one.

If one listens to the recordings, made in the early 1920s, of E. H. Sothorn and Julia Marlowe,¹¹ the grand American theatrical couple at the turn of the century, one is able to hear a vocal pattern that hearkens back to the elocutionary teachings of William Murdoch, and before him to the founder of elocution, James Rush, in the America of the early nineteenth century.¹² It

⁹ Notes [italics mine].

¹⁰ Passy also edited the IPA's journal *Le Maître Phonétique*, "The Phonetics Teacher."

¹¹ Early recordings of Sothorn and Marlowe, and many other famous actors from the late nineteenth century on, are available in the Crest Cassette series "Traditions of Acting," produced by the Creegan Company, Steubenville, Ohio.

¹² Sothorn studied with Murdoch, who had studied with Rush.

was a pattern that mandated the extreme extension of vowel sounds often with a tremulous dying fall of intonation when a word is to be emphasized, so that the lines were more sung than spoken; a pattern that required syllables—which in ordinary conversation are unstressed—to be stressed with discrete vowel sounds, as though one were reading the written word out of a book and paying attention only to the word as spelled (the “book word”), not to the spoken utterance (so that “ocean” becomes “owe-see-yun”); a pattern that insisted upon a heavy glottal attack on words beginning with vowels as a sign of vocal vigor: the active explosion of the vocal folds into an open orotund vowel sound.¹³

This was the hallmark of elocution in its late and somewhat decadent form, where every inflection, every gesture, every pronunciation was predetermined in the textbooks. One can easily imagine this prescriptive progression through the decades in nineteenth-century America where oratory emerged as the popular form of entertainment. In a growing nation in which professional theatrical performance was not easily available to large segments of the rural population, oratory satisfied the theatrical needs of the country. While acting genius could not be directly taught to the general public, oratorical techniques certainly could. Speakers who needed to be persuasive in large halls, or in open spaces, adopted dynamic if unsubtle vocal styles. So the trilled “R” flourished, along with the heavy glottal attack and the book-word pronunciations.

But William Tilly perceived that in American oratory, and also in speech education generally, verbal form had become a parody of practical function. It was time for a more scientific approach which drew its standards from the speech action and not from orthography.

Tilly's two main contributions to speech training were his zealous promotion of the International Phonetic Alphabet, called the IPA like the organization that developed it, and his use of the IPA to teach speakers prescriptive patterns based on the spoken rather than the written word. Speech texts in the United States that were written just after the turn of the century¹⁴ contain few if any attempts at phonetic notation of any sort, which made for unwieldy transliterations to transmit the details of the spoken sounds to the reader of the book. But by the 1930s nearly all texts used phonetics. Much of that rapid change was due to Tilly.

¹³ See, for example, John R. Scott, *The Technic of the Speaking Voice* (Columbia, MO: published by the author, 1915), 50–53. Scott had been a protégé of Murdoch.

¹⁴ A good example is S. S. Curry's *Mind and Voice* (Boston: The Expression Company, 1910). Curry was one of the handful of eminent voice and acting teachers who made Boston the center of voice, speech, oratory, and acting training early in this century. Along with his School of Expression were the Leland Powers School, where Edith Warman (Skinner) studied with Margaret McLean, and Emerson College.

Elocutionists, even into the second decade of this century, rejected the use by speakers of syllabic consonants, such as [sʌdn] for "sudden," insisting instead on the intrusion of a vowel between the "b" and the "d" as in [sʌden], with some stress on both syllables, because that corresponded most closely with the word as written. Tilly rightly regarded that practice as nonsense, and devoted his sole written article¹⁵ to the subject of unstressed syllables and weak-form vowels. His insistence on weak-form vowels, the vowel sounds we produce in unstressed syllables, helped to shape a special place for phonetics in speech education, as a notation of spoken sound that was far more useful than the orthography of printed Roman letters.

WORLD-ENGLISH

There was another item on William Tilly's syllabus for his students, however, and it marked the dividing line between Tilly the language scientist and Tilly the passionate advocate. He believed fervently in the inherent superiority of a pattern of English pronunciation which he and his students termed "World English" or sometimes "World Standard English." His disciple Marguerite DeWitt in her writings portmanteaued it into "Euphonetics," while Margaret Prendergast McLean — and later Edith Warman Skinner — always termed it "Good American Speech."¹⁶

As initially defined by Tilly and those students who put his doctrines into print, World English was a speech pattern that very specifically did not derive from any regional dialect pattern in England or America, although it clearly bears some resemblance to the speech patterns that were spoken in a few areas of New England, and a very considerable resemblance, as we shall see, to the pattern in England which was becoming defined in the 1920s as "RP" or "Received Pronunciation."¹⁷ World English, then, was a creation of speech teachers, and boldly labeled as a class-based accent: the speech of persons variously described as "educated," "cultivated," or "cultured"; the speech of persons who moved in rarified social or intellectual circles and of those who might aspire to do so. Margaret Prendergast McLean asked, "WHAT USAGE is the law and rule of speech?" and answered, "Linguistics scholars and historians have incontestably established the fact that it is the speech of the intelligent, cultivated classes — who have sorted, refined and polished the speech of the masses — which becomes the final law and rule."¹⁸ Sophie Pray, who brought Tilly's teaching into the New York public school

¹⁵ William Tilly, "The Problem of Pronunciation," in *A Course of Study in Speech Training and Public Speaking for Secondary Schools*, A. Drummond, ed. (New York: 1925).

¹⁶ A term which, for obvious reasons, was never reduced to an acronym.

¹⁷ "Received" in the sense of "accepted" or "preferred."

¹⁸ *Good American Speech* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1928), 55–56.

system, had a more mystical formulation for this key to upward social mobility: "Good speech signifies the possibility of readier spiritual integration with, and membership in, the cultured group in which most of us want to live as citizens."¹⁹

What is more, World English was considered by Tilly's followers to be an identifying pattern for cultured coequals among English speakers the world over, precisely because it was not actually spoken by any known regional dialect group. For Margaret McLean, this acted to counter the frequent resistance by American students to learning what — to their untutored ears — was a British accent:

The author has never met an American who was not willing to accept the standard form of English speech as being the best form when the meaning and significance of 'standard' was clearly explained. When he fully understands that it is the international, world-wide form of cultured usage which he is advised to adopt he does so eagerly and wholeheartedly. It is the *mistaken* idea that he is being advised to adopt some other person's regional or national dialect that arouses his indignation, creates his stubborn prejudices, makes him deaf to reason and blind to truth and keeps him in the linguistic gutter.²⁰

However, this concept was a slippery one as used by Tilly's followers. In other contexts it seemed more useful to acknowledge the ties of World English to England. Marguerite DeWitt described the Southern English RP as "practically the equivalent of . . . our own Word-Accepted Standard."²¹ One possible reason was that while proponents of RP in England were also promoting it as a class-based accent, not a regional dialect, and while some of them — especially Daniel Jones and Walter Ripman — were in close contact with Tilly and his circle, the English were not making any attempt to assert that RP was influenced by any speech pattern beyond the shores of the sceptred isle. So those Americans who wanted to find common ground for their own "cultured" speech and England's RP needed to make the ideological voyage eastward.

THE PATTERN

World English and RP were different from one another in many details, but they shared important vowel and consonant sounds which, for Americans, were markers for an English accent. World English used the "broad A" or "ah" (phonetically [ɑ]) in many of the same words as RP, such as "pass,"

¹⁹ *Graded Objectives for Teaching Good American Speech* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1934), 5.

²⁰ *Good American Speech*, 77.

²¹ *Our Oral Word, As Social and Economic Factor* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1928), 127. Clearly the Tilly followers had a friend at E. P. Dutton.

"dance," and "half," but not in the words that did not follow the usual spelling conventions governing "broad A" use, such as "banana," where the American "flat A" [æ] was employed. The RP lip-rounding as a substitution for the American "ah" on words like "hot" and "not" into the phonetic [ɒ]²² was also used, producing a short, open "aw." The first vowel sound in "current" or "worry" was pronounced with an "uh" [ʌ] and the American "short E" of "bet" [ɛ] was raised to the tenser RP [eɪ]. However, unlike RP, there was little if any diphthongal slide from a mid or front vowel on the "long O" [oʊ]. Weak form vowels were, of course, always used in unstressed syllables.

World English did employ American stress patterns, so that words like "corollary" and "controversy" were always pronounced with a stress on the first syllable, not the second, as in the RP of the period. And World English did not share the English insistence on anglicising all French loan-words, so that "garage" phonetically was pronounced [gə'ɑ:ʒ] not [gæ'ɑ:ʒ].

The most important consonant change — and one defended with singular intensity by Tilly's students — was the elimination of all post-vocalic²³ "R" sounds in words like "car" or "hurt" (what is usually called "R-coloring.") Now, this already was a feature of most East Coast American dialects from Maine to the Carolinas, but its inclusion in a pattern which already had several key RP sounds made it seem even more like an English accent to most American speech teachers who were working in the primary and secondary school systems.

There are many phonetic examples of World English as it was defined by Tilly and his followers. The most prolific recorder of approved speakers of the approved accent was Marguerite DeWitt, who included in her books dozens of "euphonetigraphs," phonetic transcriptions of persons reading from the collected works of Marguerite DeWitt.

In the 1920s the battle over American speech standards was particularly fierce, mirroring a like controversy a decade earlier over RP in England.²⁴

²² Generally, at that time, transcribed as [ɔ] or [ɔɪ]. The "aw" of "law" or "bought" was transcribed as [ɔɪ].

²³ Those occurring after a vowel in a syllable.

²⁴ Robert Bridges, then Poet Laureate, had a bitter fight with Daniel Jones over the primacy of Northern Standard *versus* Southern Standard of RP. Bridges wrote, "We have only to recognize the superiority of the northern pronunciation and encourage it against London vulgarity, instead of assisting London jargon to overwhelm the older tradition, *which is quite as living*." From *A Tract On the Present State of English Pronunciation* rev. edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913). This was mild in comparison to the Scottish Dr. J. Y. T. Greig, who called RP "the most slovenly of all the ways of speaking English... that silliest and dwabliest of all the English Dialects, P.S.S. [Public School Speech]." From "Breaking Priscian's Head" quoted in John Burbank, *What Is Standard English Speech?* (Tokyo: Shijo Shobo, 1934), 72.

The issue centered not on speech for the stage, but on speech as it should be taught in public schools, or used by speakers in public life. When Professor John Kenyon first published his influential textbook *American Pronunciation*²⁵ he came out firmly against the primacy of any one speech standard in the United States, especially one that was based on class and not on the way any actual Americans spoke:

The author has tried to avoid dogmatism with regard to preferable pronunciations. No attempt is made to set up or even to imply a standard of correctness based on the usage of any part of America. He believes that the state of cultivated pronunciation does not warrant the more prescriptive method used by Professor Daniel Jones and Mr. Walter Ripman in standard pronunciation in England. Whether there is ever to be a single standard in America or not, the time is not ripe for it.²⁶

Kenyon then announced that he would use as his model his own locality, the Western Reserve of Ohio.

The response by Tilly's disciples was instantaneous. Windsor P. Daggett, in the pages of *Theatre Arts Monthly*, belittled Professor Kenyon as "the boy from Ohio," in a lengthy article on speech standards.²⁷ And this was by no means the only barrage. By the time Kenyon wrote the preface to his fourth edition, a few years later, he was clearly on the defensive:

Certain criticisms . . . make it necessary to affirm again that the author does not advocate this [General American] or any one type as the sole standard for America. To help students escape from such a point of view was one of the objects of this book. The author admits no rivalry in his admiration of that clear, intelligent pronunciation of the best types of Southern and Northern British, of Scottish standard English, of Eastern, Southern, and General American, which is the best index of personality, that most interesting of facts. But apparently this does

²⁵ Ann Arbor: George Wahr, vi.

²⁶ It should be noted that use of words such as "cultivated" were not the sole precinct of the Tilly group, as demonstrated by this quotation. The difference, though, is that with Tilly's followers, the class-based focus was an active and central part of their ideology, not merely an obeisance (as with Kenyon) to the biases of the age.

²⁷ In *Theatre Arts Monthly*, September, 1925, 604. In the July 25, 1925 issue of *The Billboard*, the weekly show-business newspaper, Daggett devoted an entire column to a scathing critique of Kenyon. A few years before (September 23, 1922) in the same weekly, Daggett had been even rougher on a letter-writer named "Gene," a teacher who had criticized the Tilly standard on the post-vocalic "R"; Daggett asserted that Gene's ideas "ought to dismiss you from any position you hold as a teacher of English." Addressing Gene as "you poor nut," he suggested that "you ought to be handcuffed to Olga Petrova [a vaudeville performer with a dubious Russian accent] and forced to listen to her uvula-r for the rest of your life."

not satisfy such critics. One must not describe or even speak respectfully of the traditional speech of ninety million people. Some of the astonishing specimens of neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring that greet the radio listener appear to be prophetic of what we may expect from a continued fostering of the naïve assumption that only one form of speech can be correct.²⁸

In this campaign the Tilly followers showed enormous solidarity and dedication. In 1933 a call had gone out in *Le Maître Phonétique*²⁹ (the journal of the International Phonetic Association) for some descriptive transcriptions of American speech, and Tilly's students responded immediately. Everything in that journal is written phonetically, and for two successive issues the Tilly model was represented by, among others, Sophie Pray, Margaret McLean, Letitia Raubicheck, Alice Hermes, and Edith Warman (not yet Edith Warman Skinner). All the phonetic transcriptions from these several donors were absolutely identical in their speech patterns. Even their sometime ally Daniel Jones, then editor, had to demur:

We have received numerous letters from American colleagues suggesting that the pronunciation shown in the specimens collected by Miss Pray represent a theoretical standard and not what is actually heard in any part of America. As an outside observer who endeavors to be impartial I would say that the pronunciation shown in those texts appears to me to be rare in America, though I have heard it from three American speakers, including one of the contributors to those texts.³⁰

If even Daniel Jones observed that World English was "rare in America," it must have seemed obvious to Tilly's followers that their missionary efforts needed to be redoubled.

The war was waged for almost three decades — until the mid-1940s — in the pages of professional journals like *American Speech* and *The Quarterly Journal of Speech Education*. Marguerite DeWitt, Windsor P. Daggett, Letitia Raubicheck, Sophie Pray, and occasionally Margaret Prendergast McLean were the chief warriors for the Tilly group. C. K. Thomas of Cornell University, John Kenyon of Hiram College, and phoneticians Giles Gray and Claude Merton Wise were frequent critics of World English. The renowned philologist George Philip Krapp, who like Tilly taught at Columbia, had been claimed through very selective quotation of his influential 1921 book *The English Language in America*³¹ to be one of the Tilly camp, despite his hav-

²⁸ *American Pronunciation* (4th edn.), vii–viii.

²⁹ By Jaime De Angulo (January, 1933), 12.

³⁰ September 1933, 19.

³¹ 2 vols. (New York: Century Company). See also Krapp's earlier *The Pronunciation of Standard English in America* (Oxford University Press, American Branch, 1919).

ing coined the term "General American" to describe the accent pattern of the mid-west and western states, i.e., most of the country. But after the publication in 1924 of Marguerite DeWitt's *EuphonEnglish in America*, Krapp's apparently scathing rejection of the Tilly standards in a review in the *New York Tribune* caused the indefatigable DeWitt to devote an entire chapter in her next book³² to answering him.

We know already that the level of invective on the Tilly side was high, and it was often matched by its critics. Gray and Wise condemned the Tilly followers for "fanaticism,"³³ and C. K. Thomas referred to them as a "cult."³⁴ When Thomas published the results of a survey of phoneticians and speech professors around the country which roundly rejected World English in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*,³⁵ Tillyite Letitia Raubicheck did a counter-poll for the same journal, confining it to New York City colleges and schools where World English was still taught by many instructors and adding Margaret McLean (who by this time had moved to California) to the list for good measure; the results³⁶ were predictable.

The accusations of cult status, while perhaps extreme,³⁷ were understandable, given the overwhelming zeal and determination of Tilly's students. World English for them was not an option, it was a mission. The very rigor of Tilly's system, no doubt deriving more from the pedagogy of German philology than from the British navy as DeWitt had speculated, set him apart from other teachers. A student who began study with William Tilly was embarking on a years-long apprenticeship; most of his students — including Edith Skinner — studied with him for at least five years, and some for over a decade, even after establishing active careers in the field themselves. Tilly demanded that students arrive at his classes with precisely six well-sharpened number two pencils at the ready, the better to transcribe the tiniest defining diacritic. The class dynamic was censorious and hierarchical: students sat, row on row, in the order of Tilly's estimation of their abil-

³² *Our Oral Word, As Social and Economic Factor* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1928), 142–169. DeWitt cited Krapp's review as "Phonetics and People," *New York Tribune*, 7 June, 1926. However, I have been unable to find it in the issue cited, and 1926 is two years after the publication of *EuphonEnglish in America*. DeWitt tried to characterize Professor Krapp as playing both sides of the issue, but he had co-written a speech improvement textbook in 1922 with Anna I. Birmingham, *First Lessons in Speech Improvement* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons) that favors the General American pattern, not World English.

³³ *The Bases of Speech*, 199.

³⁴ *QJS*, October 1945, 326.

³⁵ *QJS*, October 1945, 318–327.

³⁶ *QJS*, April 1946, 51–54.

³⁷ Even allowing that the word "cult" is a much more ominous word today than in 1945.

ities. Margaret McLean always occupied the place of honor, "first chair" in the front row as Tilly's assistant, and the less favored labored to slowly work their way up to the front. Edith Skinner prized the fact that after several years, she found herself sitting next to McLean.

Other factors isolated Tilly and his followers from the rest of their colleagues, their use of narrow transcription, for example. Most speech teachers and linguists tried to keep their phonetic transcription as simple as possible so as not to confuse their students or burden them with unnecessary detail. But Tilly positively reveled in phonetic minutiae, with subscript diacritics depending down from other subscript diacritics in nearly every word, gently — compulsively — tweaking the sounds this way and that.

More idiosyncratic is the fact that none of this bounty was spent on truly descriptive transcriptions of the way people actually talked. While Tilly pioneered the use of nonsense dictation as a teaching tool, and phonetic transcription using foreign languages which the transcriber did not know, he always adhered to a rigid standard of pronunciation in any language, and his students' transcription of his phonetic patterns became almost ritualistic in their sameness; this had the effect of counteracting any potential advantages of narrow transcription. An examination of a page from Edith Skinner's notebooks while she was studying with Tilly shows that ostensibly descriptive details, such as onset of vocalization in initial D's, ossify into rules which must be repeated every time the sound is transcribed.³⁸ Little wonder that the valuable *A History of Speech Education in America* describes Tilly's "cumbrous diacritics" as "symbols of orthodoxy rather than tools of fine distinction."³⁹

Tilly and his students also used a non-connected cursive phonetic script in their transcription, even though most other phoneticians had started to use printed symbols exclusively, and some of Tilly's symbols were quite unlike those being used by others in the field, so the sense of detachment from the mainstream of phonetic study was enhanced by the very mechanics of the work.

LEADING THE WAY

William Tilly, in spite of — or perhaps because of — his stern teaching methods and grudging approbation, exerted an almost mystical hold on his students, who felt that he was showing them something truly unique and irreplaceable, a standard of language use that they could carry to the rest of the nation. Windsor P. Daggett gives a quaint, if condescending, picture of Tilly's students during his prime in America:

³⁸ My deep appreciation to Timothy Monich for giving me access to Skinner's notes.

³⁹ Karl Wallace et al. eds. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954), 338.

When William Tilly steps out of his phonetic classroom at Columbia University to go a-visiting he puts on his prettiest coat and a wing collar, brushes his fatherly locks into a boyish combback, and looks like a financier on Fifth Avenue for Easter parade. He carries in his head such a bankful of certified checks on the sound of "r" that he defies anyone to look him out of countenance or to call him a fabricator. All the school teachers follow after Tilly when he goes a-visiting, and when he has been announced to speak on the letter "r" the auditorium of Hunter College isn't large enough to hold the schoolmarms who follow their Pied Piper into the mountain of "Silent Letters." . . . Tilly told his audience, mostly women, that he was not sorry that there were only three men in sight. If the women take hold of this question we shall have nothing to fear in the progress of cultured speech. Tilly gave several readings of English "as it should be spoken." There was no interruption until the janitor shouted "Six o'clock!" The teachers swear by Tilly, and they are going to knock the "r" out of New "York" and several other places.⁴⁰

The book dedications to Tilly show a similar respect, indeed an awe. Marguerite DeWitt acknowledged "Professor William Tilly, than whom there are no other world-scholars who may fairly claim to have done more to promote and develop the practical application of Phonetics and especially Euphonetics."⁴¹

Margaret Prendergast McLean's acknowledgement was even more reverent:

I should not presume to undertake this task if I had not had the guidance of Professor William Tilly of Columbia University, with whom I have had the privilege of working for the past five years, and to whom I am indebted for my knowledge of the science of phonetics and its application to spoken English, and other languages. All of the charts, tables, terminology, and general methods of procedure used in the text have been given to me by Professor Tilly, either directly or indirectly.

I most gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to him for these and countless other favors; for his great courtesy and kindness; for his patient and constant help and encouragement; and for the inspiration which his wide vision, high culture, and noble ideals have given, and will continue to give me. Like Plato's cave men, I was groping in the dark and he showed me the light.⁴²

When Tilly passed away, his grieving students formed the William Tilly Phonetic Association. Their Resolutions, adopted only two weeks after his

⁴⁰ *The Billboard* (May 5, 1923), 39, 43.

⁴¹ *EuphonEnglish in America*, 158.

⁴² *Good American Speech* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1928), vii.

death, sum up their attitude toward their mentor better than any interpretation. This is its summation, in part:

The voice of a Master of the Spoken Word has been silenced in death, the stout heart of a leader has been stilled in its labors. Those who knew William Tilly as a teacher of teachers, realize the great loss the schools have suffered in the passing of one who had the gift of kindling ardor, of calling forth devotion to a worthy cause, of infusing courage into his followers to persevere in the face of difficulties and opposition . . .

In his effort to achieve this splendid goal, he received the accolade of greatness — misunderstanding, opposition and, at times, hostility. These, however, did not daunt his sturdy spirit but engendered a loftier consecration, a more exalted enthusiasm.

His work is done; his death ends an epoch. His devoted followers across the chasm of separation salute his gentle spirit and rededicate themselves to the unfinished task of training the young to the use of good oral English. William Tilly, though dead, speaks to ears receptive to his message:

“Be Strong!

*It matters not how hard the battle goes, the day how long,
Faint not, fight on! Tomorrow comes the song.”⁴³*

A call to arms: the thing that further separated the Tilly group from its colleagues. For not only did they possess an ideal and a hero, they also had an enemy.

THE CAUSE

Margaret Prendergast McLean once remarked to fellow voice teacher Robert Parks that a reasonable prediction for American speech was that everyone would be using the “schwa” (a very relaxed, neutral “uh” sound, phonetically [ə]) as their only vowel in a few years.⁴⁴ This was probably a somewhat facetious comment, but it describes a vision of a kind of linguistic entropy afflicting verbal discourse in this country that was at the core of the Tilly rhetoric. Without that thin brave line of speech teachers preserving the standards of articulation, American speech would soon deteriorate into one dull groan through articulators indisposed to, or incapable of, any movement at all. (Of course this dire prediction did not come to pass. Nor will it: speech within any dialect group finds the level of sound differentia-

⁴³ “Resolutions Adopted By The William Tilly Association, October 11, 1935, New York. Columbiana Collection, Columbia University Library.

⁴⁴ In conversation, 1989. For many years Parks was the voice instructor at Carnegie-Mellon (formerly Carnegie Tech), the same training program where Edith Skinner spent most of her career as speech teacher.

tion that effectively serves communication within that group, but no more than that. There is no need to produce sound differentiations that do not contribute to improved comprehension by the listener.)

As Marguerite DeWitt's book title *EuphonEnglish* suggests, the pattern espoused by Tilly was supposed to represent not only clarity, but also euphony. Throughout the writings of the group, it was asserted again and again that these sounds were quite literally more beautiful than the lesser regional dialects and foreign accents they were meant to supplant. Much of this ideology came from their prime source for English language history, Henry Cecil Wyld, whose campaign on behalf of RP in England had been unceasing. Wyld was given to such pronouncements as "We must consider that a dialect which has no [ā]⁴⁵ is under a grave disability as a sonorous form of speech . . . This sound [æ] is neither as sonorous nor as beautiful as [ā]."⁴⁶

So the Tilly followers were grappling with the forces of verbal ugliness, represented by every form of speech that was not this particular ornate artifice of speech teachers—those forms of speech, in short, which almost all Americans actually spoke.

Within only a few miles' radius from Columbia University, the embattled speech teachers could find millions of people whose speech showed the influences of these malign forces: the hordes of foreign-born who had immigrated in recent decades, the African-Americans who were moving more and more into the cities of the north, the many other Americans who rejected the "fahncy speech"⁴⁷ of World English in the street and on the stage for patriotic reasons and who felt—like H. L. Mencken—the growing identity of an "American language," the growing numbers of American socialists and communists who rejected any class-based standard of speech and harkened back instead to Thorstein Veblen's dictum that "great purity of speech is presumptive evidence of several successive lives spent in other than vulgarly useful occupations."⁴⁸

Tilly's followers, in striking back, did not stop at ridiculing the sounds of a polyglot United States; they attacked the people who spoke them also. "Ignorance may be condoned," Sophie Pray warned, "lack of dexterity may be excused, but faulty speech and foreign accent are indelible signs of social inferiority."⁴⁹ Marguerite DeWitt went further, devoting a section of *Euphon-*

⁴⁵ In modern phonetics [a], the "Broad A."

⁴⁶ "The Best English: A Claim for the Superiority of Received Standard English." In *Proper English?* ed. Tony Crowley (London: Routledge, 1991), 213.

⁴⁷ Especially derisive because English RP doesn't use the "Broad A" in pronouncing "fancy."

⁴⁸ *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: MacMillan, 1899), 399.

⁴⁹ *Graded Objectives*, 6.

English to an urgent plea for a more restrictive immigration policy. This is the ideology of World English stripped of the euphemisms that often surrounded it:

Because a nation may have passed through an obligatory stage of increase from without it is not bound, morally or otherwise, to a life-long policy of non-exclusion. Arriving at a certain stage of progress, prosperity, international recognition and influence and almost unlimited future opportunity makes it a national danger to follow an unrestricted and, above all, non-selective immigration policy.... Neither for these nor any other reasons can a nation afford to de-racialize its nucleal self, and no nation that has developed a moderate race-consciousness will tend toward, or persist in tending toward, an eventually suicidal policy...

The innumerable poverty-stricken, unfortunate, but self-respecting, law-abiding foreigners who came to our shores in past generations with a genuine desire to become an integral part of our national existence—who, however lowly, came here with a background of ideals—were an entirely different proposition from THE FAR TOO UNLIMITED INFLUX OF THOSE ALIENS⁵⁰ who are in great part racially opposed to us, or those who are but the unlamented dregs of Europe, relieving the nations that they desert, and who vitally injure whatever nation they descend upon.

To squander national vitality and money on that which will but cause biological disintegration of a nation is not philanthropy; to infuse into a body politic blood that destroys the racial blood of a nation is not the deed of a rational healer; to foster the growth of parasites on a national tree of education and knowledge is not the work of an advanced sociologist.⁵¹

Overt racism and ethnocentric bias were hardly unknown in American academic writing of the 1920s, and were fairly common before then; but the important point is that DeWitt's view is crucial to the class basis of World English, not merely a peripheral issue. As an American, living in a country that made much of denying the existence of classes (at least on a formal cultural basis), she was arguing on behalf of a social elite: one founded not on noble birth, but on a presumed nobility of thought, ideal, and purpose, as defined by predictable standards and in predictable terms—cultured, cultivated, and so on. Of course, from the standpoint of social science (actually, from any informed perspective) the imposition through incessant drill of a homogeneous accent contrived by speech teachers and actually spoken by no one would have precisely the opposite effect of sucking any cultural identity out of verbal discourse. World English is, in a very real sense, a consciously decultured accent.

⁵⁰ Emphasis by the author.

⁵¹ 35–36.

Certainly too, DeWitt's opinions on the subject of race are not in themselves proof that others in the Tilly circle thought precisely as she did, but none of her friends and colleagues ever rejected these views in writing. To the contrary, every major writer in the group—Tilly himself, Daggett, Raubicheck, Pray, and McLean—either praised *EuphonEnglish* in print, or quoted approvingly from it, or both.

As America moved through the Great Depression, the Tillyite ideal of a smooth upward social mobility borne on the wings of World English for those immigrants possessed of the proper values and the proper skin color must have seemed a cruel joke, as millions of workers became unemployed and even some people with the most refined accents explored their own downward mobility from the windows of buildings. By the time Tilly died, just short of his seventy-fifth birthday on September 29, 1935,⁵² his work had been rejected by practically all American speech teachers, leaving the field—in prescriptive speech education—to the “General American” (or Inland Northern) of John S. Kenyon and George Philip Krapp. His fellow phoneticians had rejected his system also. The hastily formed William Tilly Phonetic Association seems to have expired sometime in the early 1940s, and it was only in the New York City Schools that World English was still taught by a few stalwart Tilly followers for a few more years. By 1950 William Tilly's influence on the speech patterns of Americans had finally ended.

Almost.

A LIFE IN THE THEATRE

At the beginning of the twentieth century, American actors in classical plays all spoke with English accents, which were still considered the norm of “elevated” diction. In *The American Language* H. L. Mencken recalled “There was a time when all American actors of any pretensions employed a dialect that was a heavy imitation of the dialect of the West End actors of London. It was taught in all the American dramatic schools, and at the beginning of the present century it was so prevalent on the American stage that a flat *a* had a melodramatic effect almost equal to that of *damn*.”⁵³ So the application of World English to the stage was not a difficult task, even when World English was being rejected as a pattern for the American populace at large.

The aesthetics of classical stage performance at the time further enabled World English to flourish onstage while it languished within the audience. Most people considered that characters in classical plays were truly larger than life, and that the poetic language which emerged from the mouths of

⁵² According to Margaret McLean, in a letter to Edith Skinner, his last words were to tell Sophie Pray to shut up. Conversation with Timothy Monich, 1991.

⁵³ 4th edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), 331.

such characters needed to be expressed in an idealized "elevated" diction; the standards for real people were not the standards for Romeo or Juliet. Charles Henry Woolbert, a professor at the University of Illinois, decried the use of "stage speech" in real life, but added that "the stage is irrevocably tied down to the necessity of being different from everyday life. Everything that appears on the stage is in some way an exaggeration of the life it portrays: lights, costumes, makeup, stage sets, action, dialog, and pronunciation . . . Everything on the stage is illusion, including pronunciation."⁵⁴ This perception meant that even the most vigorous opponents of the Tilly pattern in real life reserved their opposition when it came to matters of stage speech.

While Tilly himself had no interest in the theatre, his direct influence on stage diction began only a few years after his arrival in America, through the efforts of a young student of his, Windsor P. Daggett. In 1921 Daggett began to write a lengthy column titled "The Spoken Word" in every weekly issue of *The Billboard*. Today *Billboard* covers the music industry almost exclusively, but in Daggett's day it was a formidable national tabloid for the entire entertainment industry: theatre, film, records, radio (in its infancy), vaudeville (nearing its dotage), opera, operetta, minstrel shows, the circus, carnivals, magic shows. For six years — through 1926 — Daggett was able to write at length on the voice and speech work of the stars of Broadway, and his columns, taken together, are an impressive, detailed, and often very perceptive record of the period. The enterprising Daggett, who had more or less cornered the New York market in theatre speech improvement, ran his own speech school for clients onstage and off, and founded Spoken Word Records, a label that lasted for some years; by the mid-twenties Daggett could offer a complete course in World English on records, as well as dramatic recitations by well-known actors of whom Daggett approved.

As we have already seen, Daggett had his biases. He vigorously disliked the acting of Alfred Lunt, because of Lunt's overly conversational vocal delivery on stage and his slurred consonants.⁵⁵ Daggett's ideal classical actor at the time was Walter Hampden, who had his own company and produced Shakespeare regularly, not to mention introducing *Cyrano de Bergerac* to American audiences in 1923. Daggett made extensive phonograph recordings of Hampden both in Shakespearean roles and in modern plays (e.g., Ibsen). But Hampden, though an American, spoke with a marked English accent. Like many talented American actors, Hampden first appeared onstage in England, working first with Frank Benson's repertory company, and later at the Adelphi Theatre in London. Only when his reputation was es-

⁵⁴ In a paper delivered at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Teachers of Speech, New York City, December 29, 1925.

⁵⁵ For example, in *The Billboard* of February 13, 1926, Daggett speaks of Lunt's being "exceedingly negligent of words." 37.

tablished did he return to the United States in 1907.⁵⁶ Once again, for Daggett, World English and RP would seem to be conflated into essentially the same pattern.

Daggett's column was the perfect place for him to campaign on behalf of World English, and to fulminate against its foes. His battle cry, extracted from a letter to him by Harvard philologist C. H. Grandgent, was "The best speech in America is heard on the stage," and it was taken up by other Tilly followers as well.⁵⁷ The stage, then, was to serve as a model for the speech of Americans generally. And to those who opposed World English, Daggett's limitless store of contempt was at the ready:

During the holidays I dropped into a meeting of the Modern Language Association in session at Columbia University. I didn't stay very long and I didn't hear very much, but what I heard was enough.

Up stands a stalwart educator, a Ph.D., no doubt, and a professor of influence in some parts of the country. There was a militant strength in his "inverted r-sounds" on which his tongue curled back with sufficient energy to crack a nut. "We ar-err the people who know," he said. "but we ar-err being ignor-err-d. We must inter-err-fer-err with the new speech depar-err-tements in our-err schools and their-err ar-err-tifical standar-err-ds of cultur-err. We must save Amer-err-ican speech from the ar-err-tifical. We ar-err the exper-err-ts and ar-err-biter-errs of the spoken wor-err-d."

God save the mark!⁵⁸

"God save the mark," indeed. When it came to the defense of World English, Hotspur (who uses this expletive in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part One*) was not a bad exemplar for Daggett's intemperance, though not a likely model for his speech.⁵⁹

But given these biases, Daggett had an acute sense of how speech issues fit into the rest of the acting process. He was even capable of criticizing his own: in 1925 he reviewed Margaret Prendergast McLean's platform reading from *Les Misérables*, and while—not surprisingly—he praised her "beautiful voice and perfect diction," he also faulted her for staying "outside" the material she was reading, and of being overly conscious of form: "She is not of it and with it in that intimate, sensitive participation which gives the final spark of universal experience and contact with the spiritual foundations of life."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ See *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Phyllis Hartnoll, ed. 4th edn.), 368.

⁵⁷ Especially Marguerite DeWitt.

⁵⁸ *The Billboard*, January 17, 1925, 41.

⁵⁹ Since Hotspur is often played as having a speech impediment.

⁶⁰ *The Billboard*, May 9, 1925, 41.

Daggett continued to write about World English in speech periodicals and in *Theatre Arts Monthly* for several years, even after "The Spoken Word" was dropped from *The Billboard* in late 1926.

MCLEAN AND SKINNER

Margaret Prendergast McLean was Tilly's assistant for a decade, and by the late 1920s was one of the most influential speech teachers for actors on the east coast. She was Head of the Department of English Diction at the prestigious Leland Powers School in Boston, and was also teaching at Richard Boleslavsky's American Laboratory Theatre in New York. Her textbook *Good American Speech* was published in 1928, and sold widely.

Edith Warman (later Edith Warman Skinner) was McLean's star pupil at the Powers School, and they remained close lifelong friends. When Skinner came to New York City, she began immediately to study with William Tilly; her notebooks from these classes suggest that she began working with Tilly in 1928 or 1929, and continued with him for at least five years.

Skinner had trained as an actress at the Powers School, so it was only natural that her interest in speech training focused on its theatrical application. McLean had brought Skinner in to work with her at the American Laboratory Theatre, and soon after, Skinner became the speech instructor at Carnegie Tech's theatre training program. At Carnegie, Skinner gradually established her reputation as the most eminent theatre speech trainer in America, not only because of the many well-known actors she worked with over the years, but also because of the many speech teachers she trained. Shortly before her retirement from Carnegie, Skinner was brought in by John Houseman to be a founding member of the faculty in the new theatre program at the Juilliard School; here Skinner trained a whole new generation of American classical actors.

In a way, it is arguable that McLean exerted an even greater influence on Skinner's formulation of World English (now called Good American Speech) than did Tilly. Good American Speech followed Tilly closely in most respects, but had a few differences. The most important of these was the use of the "intermediate A" [a] in place of the "Broad A" [ɑ] as used in English RP, in the so-called "ask-list" of words—grass, path, half, past, command, and the like. This change mediated the vowel sounds closer to the General American pronunciation, although to most American ears it still sounded English. McLean followed Tilly's treatment of the "short E" sound in words like "bet" or "tell" (in General American [ɛ]) representing it phonetically as a closed, linguistically tense sound [ɛ̟] much like the English pronunciation. Skinner, perhaps to simplify, took the change even fur-

ther,⁶¹ using the unlowered form [e], which has the phonetic disadvantage of being indistinguishable from the French E *accent aigu* of words like "été."

There was a third Tilly follower who had a major influence on speech for the stage. Alice Hermes taught for many years at the HB Studio in New York City, and there trained a huge number of actors and several noted speech teachers.

After the diction doldrums of the 1950s, marked by the ascendancy of "method" acting on stage and in film, Skinner's influence on American speech training revived with the growth of the regional theatre movement in the 1960s. There was a sudden demand for actors with skills in the classical repertoire. Regional theatres became sites for professional training, and simultaneously the number of M.F.A. acting training programs at universities began to multiply. Many of the founders of regional theatres were Carnegie graduates⁶² and most of the speech instructors in the training programs were Skinner students.

But Skinner was not the only theatre speech teacher in America, and not all American speech teachers used the World English model. Why did Skinner's approach prevail? At least part of the answer lies in Skinner's embrace of the Tilly pedagogy in her own teaching. Like Tilly, Skinner ruled her classes with the proverbial rod of iron. Like Tilly, she seated students in order of their skills in Good American Speech, and progression to the front of the class became a sought-after goal. Like Tilly she favored narrow, rather than broad, phonetic transcription. Like Tilly, she used phonetics primarily as a tool to inculcate Good American Speech, not as a means of defining sound distinction in itself. Like Tilly she relied heavily on incessant drill exercises. Like Tilly, she used an unconnected cursive phonetic transcription, with a strong emphasis on writing the symbols beautifully. Like Tilly, she insisted on Good American Speech as a speech pattern for life as much as for art.

And like Tilly, Edith Skinner imparted a sense of mission to her students. Skinner made it clear that she was engaging in a long struggle to mold the cacophony of her students' regional accents into the euphony of Good American Speech. Gaining her approbation was not easy for her students, and once won, it was all the more cherished. The lengthy agony of learning Good American Speech was something very akin to a conversion process for many Skinner students who went on to teach speech, having entered Carnegie (or

⁶¹ In her book *Speak With Distinction*. This most influential textbook, which grew out of Skinner's classroom materials at Carnegie Tech, was first put out in book form in the early 1940s. *Speak With Distinction* is currently available in a considerably revised version edited by Lilene Mansell, with new material by Mansell and Timothy Monich (New York: Applause, 1990).

⁶² Ellis Rabb at APA Phoenix, and William Ball at the American Conservatory Theatre are just two examples.

Juilliard) with their regional accents betraying their cultural deprivation, and leaving with the audible imprint of cultural achievement.

Of course, it didn't always work. Actor Charles Grodin recalled:

Edith Skinner, a tall, thin, austere woman with glasses, who was one of the foremost teachers and authorities on "good American speech" came over from Carnegie Tech. Her dedication to having everyone master "good American speech" was as intense as that of a scientist trying to rid the world of a dread disease, which was how she saw "bad American speech"—something from which I evidently suffered in abundance. "Good American speech" to me, on the other hand, sounded like an English accent. Many of Carnegie Tech's drama majors graduated sounding like Englishmen, which didn't lead to a heck of a lot of work in America. I would say a few sentences for Miss Skinner, and she would write furiously, page after page of notes of criticism for just my few sentences of "bad American speech." Finally, she said, "How can you ever expect people to pay money to see you as an actor, given how you speak? Nobody should speak like that; it's just not good American speech, it's terrible."⁶³

Late in her career Skinner, by all accounts, moderated her condemnation of regionalisms, although in an instructional videotape made in her last years she still described as "atrocious" the pronunciation of "horrible" as [hɔɹ^həbɪl].⁶⁴

Similarly, many Skinner-trained teachers today have quietly backed away from use of the "Intermediate A" in the "Ask-list," or the use of [ɔ] in words like "not" or "hot," despite their veneration for their great teacher. Some will even allow a little "R-coloring" to hang on the ends of appropriate diphthongs. But in this general retreat much of the World English pedagogy still remains. I hear Skinner teachers today still requiring that their students use Good American Speech in their daily lives as well as on stage; I hear Skinner teachers still deriding the "Broad A" as an intrinsically ugly sound when used in place of the [ɔ] in words like "caught" or "fall," however sonorous Henry Cecil Wyld (or William Tilly) might have thought it in other contexts; I hear Skinner teachers recoil from the intrinsic ugliness of the raised nasalized "Short A" [æ̃], an assessment that might offend the speaker of classical French. Most Skinner teachers still use unconnected cursive phonetic symbols and Tilly's application of vowel symbols—both rejected by linguists for over fifty years. Most of them still rely on lengthy rote word drill as the primary teaching technique to effect sound change in actors' speech.

⁶³ *It would Be So Nice If You Weren't Here* (New York: William Morrow, 1989), 38–39.

⁶⁴ "Seven Points of Good Speech in Classic Plays" (Mill Valley, CA: Performance Skills).

WORLD ENGLISH TODAY

McLean and Skinner labeled it "Good American Speech." Speech it is, most certainly, and for better or worse it has shaped generations of American actors. But its definition as "Good" is mired in a self-serving and archaic notion of Euphony, and in a model of class, ethnic, and racial hierarchy that is irrelevant to the acting of classical texts and repellent to the sensibilities of most theatre artists.

Its pedigree as "American" has already been shown to be open to serious question, especially since its earliest advocates bragged that its chief quality was that no Americans actually spoke it unless educated to do so, thus marking it as a badge of a self-defined cultural elite. But neither does one like to speak with an accent from nowhere, however "cultured." So a number of other terms for this pattern developed: Stage Standard, Stage Diction, etc., limiting its *locus* to the magic area inhabited by the player; in the larger world the most common term was the geographic oddity "Mid-Atlantic"⁶⁵ (the ocean, not the states), which had, at least, the advantage of paying obeisance to the magnetism of those English vowel sounds that so captivated Tilly and his followers.

Even Edith Skinner and Alice Hermes⁶⁶ seemed occasionally to confuse Good American Speech with the English Received Pronunciation (RP). When Skinner was guest-teaching at the American Conservatory Theatre in the 1970s, a young voice teaching colleague attended the classes, hoping to learn a good American accent. But every time that she spoke a sentence, Skinner told her that her sounds were perfect Good American Speech. Raised in Ireland and trained at London's Central School of Speech and Drama, Catherine Fitzmaurice was slightly puzzled by this praise.⁶⁷

What, then, should be the fate of this World English speech training, this pattern codified early in this century and passed down, virtually unaltered, to the American actors of today through a combination of zealous instruction, collective acquiescence, and sheer happenstance? Unquestionably, actors trained in this pattern have the ability to perform complex classical

⁶⁵ And its more travel-conscious companion "Transatlantic." See Robert Hobbs, *Teach Yourself Transatlantic* (Palo Alto: Mayfield, 1986). Hobbs's recommended speech pattern, it should be noted, differs somewhat from Good American Speech/World English.

⁶⁶ While Hermes herself provided no direct evidence of this, I recall vividly sitting in a class conducted by one of her protégées, in which the teacher informed a young Puerto Rican actress with a strong "Nuyorican" accent, that if she worked really hard she might be able to "sound like Greer Garson." Aside from the fact that Garson's illustrious film career peaked in the late 1940s, the statement also glosses over the reality that Garson, Irish-born, always sounded English in her films.

⁶⁷ In conversation, 1992.

text with denotative clarity and with an often admirable muscularity of articulation. But a price is paid.

Actors using this pattern usually sound somewhat British but not fully so. The effect is to place them (if not in the mid-Atlantic) into a kind of nether-world of Theatre Speech which is often defended as being "neutral" but which is actually merely anonymous. It is reasonable to assert that a particular regional American accent (West Texas, let's say) might clash with a specific Shakespearean production concept. But the same could be said of any specific dialect, whether English or American, including RP. Certainly there are ways to provide a more general American accent that does not limit locale obtrusively, but which yet provides some linguistic tie to the American audience that is being addressed. There might be some distraction—in a given production—in Hamlet sounding like he was from St. Louis, but it seems reasonable to expect that he might just speak with a dialect pattern indigenous to planet Earth.

Even more problematic is the normative practice of combining beginning instruction in phonetics with instruction in World English, as though the former exists only as a vehicle for conveying the latter. The imposition of a prescriptive pattern at the start of phonetics instruction means that the student is not focusing on identifying sound change (and registering it as a physical action), but instead is focusing on working her or his way into that required pattern. As a result, training in World English necessitates lengthy repetitive rote drill in class or in tutorial. (Or, as we have noted, inclusion in daily life.) Which means in turn that mastering World English becomes very time-consuming and difficult for most young actors—a self-fulfilling prophecy by its instructors, since the students are required to produce a patterned "product" before they have been allowed to learn the perceptual and articulatory skills necessary for them to do so easily. And the end result is that young American actors often come out of such training regimens burdened with a self-conscious uniformity of speech sounds, having lost whatever instinct they may have had to find the unique voice of the characters they are playing, carefully measuring out their vocal passion lest it sully the perfection of their Good American Speech.

William Tilly was a visionary and a reformer. Margaret Prendergast McLean, Alice Hermes, and—especially—Edith Skinner, were all exceptional teachers who trained many noted actors whose artistry confutes all of the dire assessments listed above. And yet... the past of World English still pervades the present of Good American Speech. Cut off from the forces that might have naturally changed it, reified in its isolation as the only true standard for theatre speech improvement, this strange artifact of the Edwardian Era still exists, little-changed, as we approach the year 2000.

Speech training for American actors whose careers will take them into

the next millennium requires a radically new formulation if speech training is to exist at all. And in doing so, if only to approach the entire issue afresh, we must let go of our nostalgic grasp on the entire structure that called itself World English or Good American Speech: let go of its pattern of sounds, let go of its formulation of phonetics, let go of its instructional approach, let go of the vestiges of its ideology. Most poignantly perhaps, we will have to turn away from those last putative native speakers of "Mid-Atlantic," huddled together in their dinghy bobbing in the swells somewhere off the Azores, calling for help—faintly, but very very clearly.

WHAT THEN?

Why then teach speech to actors at all?

In the 1960s and 1970s, there developed a strong reaction among many voice teachers and actors against the rigidity of the Good American Speech training; these trainers and actors took the opposite extreme, asserting that all speech training for actors has a negative effect, and should perhaps be abolished. There are two main thrusts to the argument. The first is that all prescriptive patterning of articulation inevitably leads to stiff and homogeneous speech production. The second is that training an actor's own speech into a different pattern robs that actor of linguistic heritage and racial or ethnic identity.

Both points were based on valid observation and experience, and both can be true in individual cases. The question really is whether either one must be true all the time, and the answer is no. For decades the Good American Speech pattern was the only game around, and set—for good or ill—the standards for phonetic rigor and speech pedagogy for actors.⁶⁸ So a young actor from an ethnic or racial minority sitting week after week in classes that try to drill into her or him the habits of "good" speech, with the further injunction that one take this "good" speech into one's daily life, might very well consider that any prescriptive patterning of speech is invasive of one's cultural essence. Were we to think so, though, we would have to believe also that learning any new dialect, or adopting a character voice for a role, or for that matter going through the complete physical, vocal, and instinctual alterations that any actor has to do to play any role at all would serve to rob the actor of cultural identity. Acting is, after all, largely about becoming someone else, albeit through the vehicle of one's own personality and awareness. Learning a new dance step, or remembering one's blocking on stage, or hitting one's marks in film, or picking up a cue, or coping fluently with complex and archaic sentence structure in classical text, are all prescriptive requirements,

⁶⁸ Robert Barton and Rocco Dal Vera, in their useful book *Voice: Onstage and Off* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995), insist that "no other system can take the boy from the 'hood' and make him the prince in his palace like [Skinner's] can . . . This work can achieve levels of speech ability simply not available . . ." 285.

and actors learn to meet them every day without losing their spontaneity or their sense of personal identity. What that student might really have been objecting to is the repetitive ideology that one speech pattern is "good" and all other speech patterns therefore less so, and the inculcation of this ideology through the use of lengthy rote drill on discrete sound change, which increases self-consciousness about the form of articulation separated wholly from its content and the physicality of its production.

Ideology and pedagogy are also the real culprits that gave rise to the first part of the argument. It was observed that many actors who came through the Good American Speech regimen not only spoke almost exactly the same as one another, they also seemed less available to verbal impulse, cut off from the immediate passionate verbal response because everything seemed filtered through the requirement to observe a particular form. On the contrary, it was asserted, if an actor could simply make the articulators available to impulse through release of inhibitory tensions, and then think the text clearly, specifically, and passionately, then sloppiness of articulation would disappear.

There is great truth in this insight. But like many great truths it carries with it a handy portable pitfall. To suggest, as Louis Colaianne does, that a "limiting regional accent is merely the by-product of patterns of tension frozen into the vocal tract"⁶⁹ is to suggest that all American regional dialects would be released magically if only those residual tensions could be released. But released into what? Lurking within this generous pronouncement is the same hierarchical view of speech clarity that reformers like Colaianne would seek to supplant. If a person has grown up speaking a dialect that habitually eliminates a consonant from a consonant cluster,⁷⁰ for example, will freedom of articulation plus intensity of thought actually cause that hitherto unused consonant to magically reappear, without the intervention of any prescriptive model? Is there some strange shared "deep dialect" hidden within all of us to which we all aspire? If so, then Tilly had a powerful argument.

Every dialect has its own complex set of muscular tensions (and relaxations too), but none of them are inhibitory to communication within the dialect group (or they would already have been modified), and releasing these held tensions will not in itself usually increase communication with dialect groups outside. Instead there needs to be an active model for the new muscular action that forms any new dialect or accent, and if it does not come from somewhere deep in our collective psyche, it then will have to come from careful listening to native speakers or instructors, combined with the skill to match the new articulatory pattern, and the ability to

⁶⁹ In *The Joy of Phonetics and Accents* (New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1994), 57. Colaianne's book is otherwise excellent.

⁷⁰ An example would be saying *mus'* instead of *must*.

hear — and feel — sound change. Prescriptive (and even proscriptive) training of a physical action does not in itself cause a lessening of spontaneity, as long as an actor does the preparatory work of mastering these skills of action before the prescriptive pattern is introduced, and as long as rote drill is minimized. Relaxation of unneeded tension is a crucial part of this preparation, but it is not responsible for the actively patterned sound change.

FOR THE FUTURE

It is a shared assumption of all speech teaching, and most language instruction as well, that if a speaker uses more of the available linguistic elements in a word, the word will be more readily understandable to all persons who speak the language, regardless of their accent. With this in mind, it becomes obvious that a model for such linguistic detail would be highly useful to the actor of classic texts, where the audience must be able easily to understand dialogue with archaic words or modern words with archaic meanings, as well as a much more complex sentence structure than we find in contemporary conversation.

Based on our awareness of what speech training for actors has been in the past, we can now look to what speech training might consist of in the future. I can suggest at least some general guidelines for a program on a two- to three-year arc of training.

1. *The ability to physically experience and isolate sound change in speech must precede learning any prescriptive pattern.* If an actor learns the physical skills of speech production, if s/he gains flexibility of articulation combined with muscularity of action, and if that actor can learn to perceive subtle gradations of sound change and feel where these are focused in the vocal tract and in the rest of the body, then the process of learning a "detail model" or the prescriptive pattern of any accent will become very easy and take a relatively short period of instruction, thus obviating the need for lengthy rote drill on the "correct" pronunciation of words and sentences. Drill, to the degree that it needs to take place, should be focused on the muscular isolation of specific sounds.
2. *Phonetic training should be descriptive before it is prescriptive.* Actors proceed very quickly if they learn acuity of perception through hearing what makes a speech pattern unique. The ability to notate what one is actually hearing is the basic objective skill for all dialect acquisition. Reliance on the unstable crutch of "illustrative words" to teach individual sounds, while perhaps unavoidable altogether, can easily be minimized.
3. *Phonetic training should include all the sounds of the world's languages, not just the ones used in a single form of American English.* Most of these speech sounds outside the repertoire of American English have direct applica-

tion in acquiring dialects or foreign accents, and even those sounds that do not will still provide a strong physical awareness of the variety of sounds possible in the production of human language.

4. *Actors should learn Narrow⁷¹ Phonetic Transcription.* Broad transcription is appropriate for most language-learning, but actors need to learn dialects and accents in much greater detail.⁷²
5. *Actors should learn phonetic printing, not phonetic script.* Printing is the standard in all other practical applications of phonetics.
6. *The Detail Model.* This is a model, not a mandate; one possible formulation of an American accent for use in speaking situations where listener comprehension of unfamiliar vocabulary or syntax is more demanding than in normal conversation. Actors may use all of it, or part of it, or none of it, depending on the speech requirements of the individual dramatic character. It does not need to be held together as one structured sound pattern, but rather is a model for detailed physical action of the articulators.

The sole criterion for the inclusion of vowel and consonant sounds in the model is linguistic detail, providing for the hearer as much linguistic information as possible from the speaker. While the detail model would enhance what would usually be called clarity of articulation, we should not make clarity, as such, the goal of a model, since our biases can easily enter into such a definition.

The detail model might take various forms, but for American actors it should always be based on patterns (especially with vowels) found in a large number of American speakers. The pattern still often (mis)termed "General American" or "Broadcast Speech" is based on "Inland Northern," the dialect found in a narrow band of northern states; since it is my own dialect I find it crystal clear in its articulation, wonderfully euphonic, and altogether the ideal dialect model.⁷³ Speakers of other general dialect areas, such as North or South Midland, might have other ideas.

⁷¹ That is, more detailed.

⁷² In this, Tilly had the right idea. Where he went wrong was in valuing rules over observation, a failing that continued into *Good American Speech*.

⁷³ For an extreme opposite view, see Timothy C. Frazer, "The Language of Yankee Imperialism: Pioneer Ideology and 'General American,'" in *"Heartland" English*, Timothy C. Frazer, ed. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993). Frazer sees Inland Northern as a Puritan power play effected by serried ranks of grim westward marching New Englanders, foisting their dialect on innocent southerners who had wandered out to Kentucky and Missouri, presumably to commune with nature. Ironically—within the context that we have been considering—Frazer's chief villains are John Kenyon and George Philip Krapp. Frazer ends by suggesting Inland Northern's complicity in the U.S. military interventions in Southeast Asia and Latin America in recent decades. This does seem to be an overstatement.

Because the detail model is not a monolith, parts of it may be combined with any other dialect or accent, to widen the dialect's comprehensibility to speakers of other dialects in a theatrical setting.

Learning the skills of flexible, active articulation, and a complete repertoire of speech sounds through descriptive, experiential phonetic training does take time in itself. But the time expended is more than made up for by the increased capacity to learn any dialect, from the detail model to Tangier Island, in a matter of days or weeks, rather than the full year that was customarily used to learn Good American Speech. Good American Speech itself is still a very useful dialect when playing actors or social aspirants of yesteryear,⁷⁴ and like any dialect it can be readily available to any actor who has gained the skills of making sound distinctions easily.

7. *Rejoining the world.* Perhaps most important of all, speech training for actors—so long frozen in time and isolated in pedagogy—must reestablish the ties with allied disciplines that it forswore so many decades ago. The fields of articulatory phonetics, acoustic phonetics, and dialectology have valuable resources in their research for actors and theatre speech teachers. I would submit, too, that theatre speech and dialect training has much to offer these disciplines in the development of pedagogy, since its laboratory is the mind and body of the performer; this requires a physically-based approach, and a unity of precise speech skills with freedom of voice production. Performance dialects also require great detail and accuracy of transcription and replication, yet are regularly taught in rehearsal settings where time and attention spans are at a minimum, and therefore may provide teaching methods useful to our colleagues in allied non-theatre areas.

There are many hopeful signs that this emergence into the world of today is already happening, in large part spurred by the dialogue among theatre voice and speech teachers that began with the founding of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association.

Speech training for actors will always be a subject for debate because human speech patterns are always subject to change, and these changes will always be measured against the need for full and easy understanding in the theatre environment.



⁷⁴ The famed monologist Ruth Draper created a wonderful portrait of a New York "society lady" in the 1930s, in her monologue "The Italian Lesson," using the World English/Good American Speech pattern.