

BADDING PRACTISE IN CENNERFIELD?

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Many years ago I heard a recorded lecture entitled "Good Speech". I have forgotten the advice it contained, but if that speaker were here today I think he would have to start all over again. I think he would suggest a new approach to vowel sounds. A, E, I, O, U are our written vowels, but our sounding vowels are thirteen in number, and are used in the sentence:

Through good known thoughts of art love learns and then takes his ease

The AY in takes is really a double vowel sound, consisting of AY gliding into EE; similarly, the OH in known glides into OO. The other eleven are single vowel sounds, but have always fallen into two groups, long (as in through, thoughts, art, learns, ease) and short (good, of, love, and, then, his). Conceivably some of the short vowels might be lengthened for certain purposes, as when one says GOO...D when encouraging a puppy or a child, but they sound better when they are kept short. The long vowels vary in usage, coloring speech according to locality, or reflecting different backgrounds.

A slight knowledge of French inclines one to tolerate the sound OO, as in bouquet, gourmet, tournament. But these words often are heard as BOHKAY, GORRMAY, and TURNAMENT. If these sounds are going to be fed into talking computers, some clarification had better be advocated.

In some words the written O has for many years sounded like the O in money: accomplish, company, love, monetary. MONNITARY sounds like monitory; MONEYTARY sounds like money.

Too often short vowels are promoted to long ones. Where do FAY-LINE and RHODAYSIA come from? Are these affectations by students of Latin? And I wonder what is behind POE/LITICAL OH/CASSIONS. Political occasions are prevalent enough without their being dressed up in long vowels. Individuals, possibly reflecting local custom, make elite into AY/LEET, arboretum into ARBOR/AY/TUM. But surely one who speaks of "the master of his DOO/MAIN" is off base, the word having thus left behind its integrity.

Long vowels become short just as often. I happen to live in a peninsula community, where it is customary to pick up schoolchildren who may have missed the last bus home. They rarely wish to be taken to their homes, preferring to be dropped off at the STOZZ (stores).

This shortening of a formerly long vowel has to my ear an infantile sound.

Words containing OR give trouble: support is heard as SOUP/PORT, and sometimes SUPPAWERT. The latter, besides sounding like Boston's Mayor White, offers itself as an example of many words spelt with OR that come out with the sound AW: AUTHAWERTY, FLAWERDA, AWRINDGE, REPAWERT. Conversely, many words that should contain the AW sound come out with AH: AHTHOR, LAHNCH, TAHK, ABRAHD, FRAHD, LAH. Boston comes out both as BAHSTON and BAWSTON (a long way from the original Botolfs-town), body as BAHDY (we hope not bawdy), and sauna as SAHNA (or SONNA). We attend concerts in auditoriums, not ODD/I/TORRIUMS.

Meanwhile, our hypothetical lecturer would doubtless urge some attention to consonants. If vowel sounds lean toward emotional expression (which we share with the brutes), consonants reflect the intellectual element in speech, wherein humanity is thought to excel.

The consonant T is subjected to the greatest abuse. When preceded by N it seems to have lost currency, as in MOUN'NS, SENNENCE, SCIENIST, PENNAGON, INVENNED, GENNLEMAN, ENNERTAIN, INNERNATIONAL. Before WINNER sets in, HUNNERS WONNED to find out about the HUNNING laws, or look for ANNALOPES in CENNER-FIELD. It has become D, as in BEWDERFULL, LIDER (for liter), WADING GAME, because many speakers are apparently unable to shut off the voice from a D to produce a T. They GODDA keep up their BADDING practise, and their diet should include more PRO/DEE/IN. Their cultural interests extend to PAINDINGS and MEDALWORK from the NINE/DEAN/TWUNNIES. It has become CH, as in DENCHEW GRIP (spelt Dentu Grip). Or it is completely ignored, as in CONTRACK, PRODUCK, VERDICK. Reading Kipling recently, I was surprised that one of his barrack-room characters spoke of a CONTRACK fully eighty years ago. This is EGGSACKLY the sort of thing to DISTRACK people from CORRECKLY and DIRECKLY getting their FAX right.

Perhaps it is too late to restore the lost T; is it also too late to save the double L? Must we say, like the French, or the infantile, WEY I TEH/YER, WIYUM is an EYETAYUN? If you are FAMIYAR with WIYUMSBURG, you know the effectiveness, even the VAYUE, of the Rockefeller MIYUNS. But don't go to AUS/TRY/YER -- there might be a REBELLY/ON.

And must X (CKS) become GS, as in EGGS/ACTLY, or worse, EGGS/ACKLY, LUGGS/URY?

Lost syllables would cause our good speech advocate even more pain than botched vowels and consonants: HOSPLE, KERNT (for current), hydrogen PROXIDE. Leaving the FORST, before the FOLAGE came out, we met a FAMLY moving to FLOORDA. They planned to plant SELLRY and other VEDGE/TABLES, as their pigs had died of

COL/RAH. The oldest son had FINE/LY REDGE/TURD at the UNIVERS/TY. His MEM/RV was REELY good, especially in English HIST/RV. He hoped eventually to draw a good SALL/RV as PRES/DENT, but he was no POLL/TISH/AN, and as he had a strained CART/LIDGE, was unable to use the FASILL/TIES.

Now although MOUN'NS are everywhere present, Julie Harris, in the character of Mary Todd Lincoln, said mountains. On the other hand, though she could surely say tongue, she chose to say WASHINGTON. Thus speech reflects geographical, educational, even social differences. But what is gained by saying PRIFFRY, SCEENRY or CRIMNAL court is not NESSAIRLY distinction, but merely language abuse -- something the CANDATES for PRESIDENT of UNISTATES should eschew.

For all those lost syllables, however, there are compensations. We have ARTHUR/ITIS; ATHELETES eat PARCELLY, and are good at HANDELLING the ball, MINGLE-ING and TUMBULLING, KERLENCHING their teeth during play.

From syllables to word grouping: when army and navy installations are mentioned, let us keep the voice at a higher pitch through "army and navy", lowering it for "installations", thus separating the adjectives from the operative noun. Avoid "army, and navy installations", lowering the voice at the comma (real or imagined), and running navy installations together, as if they formed the operative noun and army another noun on its own. The same principle is at work in cat-and-mouse game (not cat, and mouse game) or country dance and song society (not country dance, and song society).

All these weirdos are things that have assailed my ear in the past few weeks. Am I alone in thinking it is time to tidy up our speech before the computers take over? To seek reform is probably an exercise in futility. At least I hope that my acknowledged prejudices are not discounted simply because I was born on the other side of the Atlantic. I have lived on this side for nearly half a century, and much of what I have to say could have been said by one born here. Some of what I advocate would, I am sure, result in clearer understanding by both speaker and listener.