"The Filthy American Twang": Elocution, the Advent of American "Talkies," and Australian Cultural Identity

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> [T]here is contrasted the soft-toned enunciation of an educated Englishman and the speech of a harshly accented American who handles the fifth vowel with scant consideration.[1]

> It must be already apparent to many thinking people that since the introduction of the American talking films . . . we are in grave danger of the Americanisation of our speech.[2]

WRITING TO THE *SYDNEY MORNING HERALD* in 1930, a "Picture Patron" expressed a view that was commonly held by Australian filmgoers during the interwar years:

> Most of the American pictures shown are absolute rubbish, and an insult to one's intelligence, while the harsh, low-class voices and accent are a continual strain on one's nerves . . . English pictures, with pleasing voices and accent, are a welcome relief after most American talkies. Patrons would also welcome occasional silent films, which are most restful.[3]

One of the most vehement objections to the arrival of sound in film in Australia was that it was introducing the American accent to a culture accustomed to English pronunciations and diction. Not only were silent films seen as superior to talkies in some quarters and talkies considered crude, but the American voice on film was believed to have a profoundly detrimental effect not only on the spoken word but on the aural senses. Some believed that the American sound—both its accent and its pronunciation—would completely desecrate the English language. The director of education in New South Wales, Henry Smith, argued that

> if we are to preserve the purity of the English tongue drastic steps must be taken to keep out of the lands of the Southern Cross those of the American tongue films which do violence to the Saxon Speech. The sincere and successful efforts we are now making in Australian schools to maintain the high standard of spoken English will fail if our young children hear much of the execrable pronunciation of English which distinguishes most of the American "talkies" to-day. We want legislation to enable our censors to exclude all talking pictures which des-

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[1] *Wireless Weekly*, February 1, 1929, 16.
[2] *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 23, 1930, 5.
[3] *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 17, 1930, 9.

> ecrate the canons of pure speech as practiced among the educated classes in British communities.[4]

In a simple and blunt statement, Beatrice Tildesley, the president of the Good Film League, summed up the view of many who were of this persuasion: "Surely in a British community any of our native dialects should be preferable to the squawks and yowls of Hollywood and to Bowery slang."[5]

The debate in Australia about the coming of sound to film centered on the nature of the accent, pronunciation, and voice. The American "twang" caused great offense, while what was identified as the eloquence of the British voice was to be promoted and emulated. Not only did the appearance of certain American sounds seem novel, but those sounds were perceived in national terms, as between "modern" American and traditional and staid English. The distinction identified by John Rickard between "high" (English) and "low" (American) culture was exemplified in these debates.[6]

How do we understand the depth of this negative response to American talkies? A suspicion of, and objection to, American cultural imperialism, as identified by several historians, is certainly a crucial factor. There was concern about an increasing Americanization of Australian culture, and loyalty to the British Empire aroused further antagonism. Many criticisms were directed at the American talkie, including its moral and artistic shortcomings as well as economic considerations.[7] Speech was one aspect of this general critique, and a focus on it enhances our understanding of the extent of the public outcry in some quarters to the perceived threat that talkies posed to Australian cultural life.

Historians have long prioritized the written over the spoken and the visual over the auditory in the history of the senses. A shift of the historical imagination from seeing past societies to hearing them offers a further perspective for examining the complexity of everyday life. Recent studies by historians have taken up the initial challenge thrown up by Alain Corbin and Peter Bailey, who have identified the auditory as one aspect of cultural life that historians can no longer afford to ignore. In his pioneering study *Village Bells*, Corbin argues that a history of representations of the social world "can no longer afford to neglect materials pertaining to auditory perception."[8] Through an examination of the use of village bells in the nineteenth-century French countryside, Corbin considers how the ringing of the bells and the experience of hearing them constituted a language and a form of communication that "gave rhythm to forgotten modes of relating between individuals and between the living and the dead. It made possible forms of expression, now lost to us, of rejoicing and conviviality." Listening to the sound of ringing bells was a way of inscribing and

[4] *Argus*, August 7, 1929, 7.

[5] *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 10, 1930, 8.

[6] John Rickard, "Music and Cultural Hierarchy, 1918–1939," in Nicholas Brown, Peter Campbell, Robyn Holmes, Peter Read, and Larry Sitsky, eds., *One Hand on the Manuscript: Music in Australian Cultural History, 1930–1960* (Canberra, 1995), 181.

[7] See Philip Bell and Roger Bell, eds., *Americanization and Australia* (Sydney, 1998); Jill Matthews, *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney's Romance with Modernity* (Sydney, 2005), 225–227.

[8] Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*, trans. Martin Thom (1994; repr., New York, 1998), xi; Peter Bailey, "Breaking the Sound Barrier," *Body and Society* 2 (1996): 49–66.

experiencing time and space; it helped to construct the identities of individual and collective communities.[9]

Bailey similarly alerts us to "the whole range of sounds that enliven the past and contribute to its changing sensory orders."[10] Social noise during the premodern period in the West tells us much, he argues, about the ways in which the control and selection of sound defined genteel identity. Sounds that were unwelcome or deemed offensive, such as the noise of petitioners, attendants, and servants, were suppressed or partitioned off.[11] Tuning in to the noise of Victorian England, Bailey found "a continuing struggle between refinement and vulgarity."[12] Yet he also observed in 1996 that sounds in history "rarely receive more than lip service."[13]

Since that time, there have been a growing number of historical works that aim to capture the auditory environment of the past.[14] Historians working across many fields have begun to listen to the past, and in doing so they have developed new arguments about the history of sensory experience. Each of those studies considers the ways in which listening to sound can provide new insights into historical places, events, and processes. These include, for example, a history of the soundscape of slavery that considers the significance of the sounds of music and language to the identities of American slaves during their experience of bondage and of freedom. A study of the sonic environment of the public and private worlds of Victorian London—from the noise of the streets and public spaces to the chatter of middle-class parlors and private homes—sheds light on how Victorians heard their environment, a crucial aspect of how they understood themselves. Histories of the introduction of new technologies and sound reproduction have further sharpened the importance of the history of the auditory. In the early-twentieth-century United States, the arrival of new technologies and the rise of modernity provide the context for examining the history of acoustics as a way of exploring the aural aspects of modernity.[15] Studies of the invention of sound technologies such as headsets, the radio, the stethoscope, the telephone, the phonograph, and the cinema highlight the ways in which techniques and patterns of listening to modern technology have dramatically changed over time.[16] Understanding the impact of these technologies has also ushered in a

[9] Corbin, *Village Bells*, xix.

[10] Bailey, "Breaking the Sound Barrier," 64.

[11] Ibid., 56.

[12] Ibid., 60.

[13] Ibid., 64.

[14] See Veit Erlmann, ed., *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity* (London, 2004); Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (Chicago, 1999); Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth- Century America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 200l); Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, eds., *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-garde* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York, 1993); Susan J. Douglas, *Radio and the American Imagination: From Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York, 1999); Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, eds., *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound* (New York, 1999); James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995); R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York, 1997); Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2003); James Latra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York, 2000).

[15] See Graham White and Shane White, *The Sounds of Slavery* (Boston, 2005); John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (New York, 2003); Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

[16] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, N.C., 2003).

heightened awareness of the centrality to Western cultures of listening to the human voice, as a way of shaping individual and collective identities.[17] The emphasis on listening in this literature is a further frame of reference for this research and draws on the insistence of Steven Connor, Emily Thompson, and Jonathan Sterne on the need to consider the influence of the auditory in the formation of individual and collective subjectivities, with particular attention to sonic landscapes and the history of listening.[18]

The hostile response to American talkies in Australia can best be historicized by considering the importance of vocal quality and correct pronunciation to notions of individual and national identity in the period before the 1920s. Doing so can highlight the significant place of elocution and the importance of the purity of voice and pronunciation in defining Australian culture and the self from the 1870s to the interwar years. The rationale for drawing attention to this earlier period is twofold: first, to claim a place for the significance of elocution in the cultural history of sound and speech in order to identify the wider auditory context within which the talkies arrived in Australia; and second, to suggest the ways in which judgments about character and the self were closely interconnected with the voice. In general, speaking well in Anglophile society marked one as a person of character and integrity and provided an entrée into respectable society. Elocution was a part of this belief in the role of voice in defining character and class standing for both men and women. "Of no small importance, and of no insignificant task as an accomplishment, is a ready and graceful elocution," noted the author of the English etiquette journal *How to Behave*. Correct speech and the ability to speak with "taste and elegance" were "indispensable requisites to the privileges of good society."[19] These aspects were considered with attention to race, national identity, class, gender, and the urban/rural divide, as speech, language, and voice are informed both implicitly and explicitly throughout the discussion by these dynamics.

Debates about the Australian, English, and American voices—and the accent, pronunciation, lexicon, and expression of each—were crucial in shaping understandings of Australian identity even before the arrival of the talkies. The centrality of language to that identity was reflected in the values emphasized through elocution and etiquette manuals as well as through the public performance of school speech days and the place of eloquence in political life. Only by understanding these cultural

[17] Anne Karpf, *The Human Voice: The Story of a Remarkable Talent* (London, 2006).

[18] Steven Connor, "The Modern Auditory 1," in Roy Porter, ed., *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London, 1997), 203–223; Sterne, *The Audible Past*; Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*. This connection between speaking and listening has not been a major area of study in Australia. As part of his formative history of Australia, Keith Hancock discussed Australian intonation and Australia's convict vocabulary in a brief examination of the evolution of Australian words and expressions. Several decades later, A. G. Mitchell charted the development of Australian speech and sound, while Russel Ward identified distinctive Australian speech patterns in his influential account of the radical national ethos. Alan Atkinson's work stands out among the few recent scholarly efforts to capture the auditory in Australia in his discussion of talking and listening in colonial and contemporary Australia. Bruce Johnson's research into the introduction of jazz, the microphone, and modernity has made a similar contribution to histories of sound, but he is concerned with music rather than language. See William Keith Hancock, *Australia* (London, 1930); Alexander George Mitchell, *The Pronunciation of English in Australia* (Sydney, 1946); Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne, 1958); Alan Atkinson, *The Commonwealth of Speech: An Argument about Australia's Past, Present and Future* (Melbourne, 2002); Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia*, vol. 2: *Democracy* (Sydney, 2004); Bruce Johnson, *The Inaudible Music: Jazz, Gender and Australian Modernity* (Sydney, 2000).

[19] *How to Behave; or, Etiquette of Society* (London, 1879), 12.

dynamics prior to the interwar years can we further grasp the intensity of the response to listening to the talkies and to the worldwide introduction of the American sound on film.

ELOCUTION—THE ART OF SPEECH AND ELOQUENCE—was a distinctive marker of social and class status and an indicator of national identity in Australia during the nineteenth century. At that time, it was taken for granted that the enunciation of "good speech" was not only desirable but also necessary. This remained the case for several decades, into the first half of the twentieth century. "There is no need, surely," wrote the elocutionist A. Musgrave Horner in 1951, "for a case to be made out in support of the importance of good speech, especially for professional and social reasons. No proof is necessary for so obvious a fact that speech is involved in a great part of some, and in almost the whole of other professional activities."[20] It was assumed that an accomplished speaking voice was essential to "facilitate success in both society and professional life."[21]

The origins of elocution date back to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when it became part of what Andrew McCann has described as the process of "self-fashioning." Speaking well became central to the "communicative integrity evident in the faithful evocation of affect, intention and meaning."[22] Once it was identified as a form of social status and cultural acceptability, it also became increasingly popular in Anglophone societies. Lynda Mugglestone estimates that five times as many works on elocution appeared between 1760 and 1800 as in the years before 1760. This popularity, she argues, attests to the "growing conviction that accent could provide a way of articulating social identity as much as words in themselves."[23] Initially, Victorian elocution and public-speaking manuals were written by the clergy for university-educated men who wished to continue a career in oratory. By the late nineteenth century, these texts were pitched at a wider audience and reinforced and legitimated class distinctions. As Mark Morrisson has argued, discourses about correct diction and verse recitation stressed the central role of a pure voice in "bourgeois self-legitimation and cultural reproduction."[24]

These developments were also part of an attempt to prescribe the proper use of

[20] A. Musgrave Horner, *Speech Training: A Handbook for Students* (London, 1951), 9.

[21] Judith Pippen with Dianne Eden, *Resonating Bodies: Reflections on 50 Years of Theory and Practice in Voice and Movement Training for Actors and the Framing of a Manifesto for Today* (Brisbane, 1997), 13.

[22] Andrew McCann, "Romantic Self-Fashioning: John Thelwall and the Science of Elocution," *Studies in Romanticism* 40 (Summer 2001): 218. For aspects of the history of elocution, see Earl R. Cain, "Elocution in German Rhetorical Theory, 1750–1850," *Western Speech* 4, no. 27 (1963): 221–226; Denyse Rockey, "John Thelwall and the Origins of British Speech Therapy," *Medical History* 23 (1979): 156–175; Rockey, *Speech Disorder in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London, 1980); Michael Shortland, "Moving Speeches: Language and Elocution in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *History of European Ideas* 8, no. 6 (1987): 639–653; Susan Kates, "The Embodied Rhetoric of Hallie Quinn Brown," *College English* 59, no. 1 (January 1997): 58–71; Nan Johnson, "The Popularization of Nineteenth Century Rhetoric: Elocution and the Private Learner," in Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran, eds., *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (Carbondale, Ill., 1993); Peter Middleton, "The Contemporary Poetry Reading," in Charles Bernstein, ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York, 1998), 262–299.

[23] Lynda Mugglestone, *Talking Proper: The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol* (London, 1995), 3.

[24] Mark Morrisson, "Performing the Pure Voice: Elocution, Verse Recitation, and Modernist Poetry in Prewar London," *Modernism/Modernity* 3, no. 3 (September 1996): 27.

the written as well as the spoken word. During the eighteenth century, grammarians increasingly saw standard pronunciation as an important aspect of establishing a normative approach to grammar. Elocution became central to these efforts to standardize pronunciation, which was seen as integral to standardizing the written word. David Crystal observes that there were more English grammar books published between 1750 and 1800 than in the entire previous two centuries combined. These shaped what became understood as a prescriptive approach to grammar, as they quickly defined what was correct and incorrect usage. "Elocution," notes Crystal, "was big business, and people were prepared to pay for it," by attending courses and lectures and by buying the elocution manuals that burst onto the market. This insatiable desire for correct speech and linguistic unity reflected a range of other cultural and political anxieties. From the outset, such a prescriptive model of correct speech and writing reinforced class differences. Furthermore, as Crystal argues, many of the grammarians of this period saw their work as part of a wider endeavor to create an ordered and unified society, in which elocution, rhetoric, and oratory were central to law, religion, and politics and hence were the basis of civilized society. Language norms, it was believed, would ensure social, civil, and cultural stability. Underlying these aspirations was an assumption that language was a subjective and not an objective construction.

The wider context of these developments is the story of the history of the English imperial project. As the British Empire expanded, so too did the English-speaking world, but speech was not adopted in uniform ways. The United States and Australia were both former British colonies that had inherited the language of Britain, but very soon each country developed its own different and distinctive accents, vocabulary, and pronunciation in response to its unique environment and emerging cultural practices. At the same time, there was a continuity of linguistic forms; throughout the nineteenth century, British textbooks were used in schools, and English literature was studied in both the United States and Australia.[25]

Once the indigenous populations in the two colonies began to speak English and develop a distinctive accent and vocabulary, the linguistic diversity became even more complex. In Australia, indigenous languages influenced white speech. One of the distinguishing features of the white Australian form of speech is the integration of indigenous terms. The systematic destruction of Aboriginal languages was a cornerstone of the colonial project, as missionaries and government bureaucrats attempted to "civilize" the indigenous population by instructing them in the values of British culture. A central aspect of this process was teaching young Aborigines English so that they could read the Bible and thereby absorb Christian morality. Although there was doubt on the part of some missionaries from the 1840s to the 1870s about whether indigenous children were capable of acquiring English, they did so with a proficiency that increasingly rivaled that of their white counterparts, lending currency to the view that patterns of speech were cultural rather than biological.[26]

Concurrently, elocution as a scientific form of voice production emerged in tan-

[25] David Crystal, *The Stories of English* (London, 2004), 296, 419–435; quotation from 414.

[26] Graham Seal, *Lingo: Listening to Australian English* (Sydney, 1999), 13; Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History since 1800* (Sydney, 2005), 36; Ian D. Clark and Toby Heydon, *A Bend in the Yarra: A History of the Merri Creek Protectorate Station and Merri Creek Aboriginal School, 1841–1851* (Canberra, 2004), 63–64.

dem with the development of a white democratic public sphere. In Australia, colonial democracy evolved around the eloquence of public speeches, which were meticulously reported in nineteenth-century newspapers and were disseminated in other publications such as pamphlets.[27] During the 1850s, five of the colonies of Australia gained self-government, and with this came valorization of the masculine political culture of speech, debate, and oratory. The importance of oratory was exemplified by colonial politicians such as William Wentworth and Henry Parkes. Daniel Deniehy, born of convict origins and an advanced democrat, especially typifies the power of eloquence and speech at this time. He was a brilliant orator, with a voice that was described as "of the most marvellous quality, low and sweet, yet pure and resonant, and magical in making its way to the hearts and sympathies of his listeners." In Parliament as well as in public demonstrations, "he was invariably listened to with the utmost respect and deference."[28]

The perception of elocution as an "art" was also connected to the development of male public-speaking and self-improvement societies, such as the Young Men's Societies that flourished from the mid-nineteenth century. These groups provided a forum for young men to come together in "mutual, spiritual and mental improvement"; an important part of this process was attending and giving lectures, debating, and public speaking.[29] Such clubs encouraged the development of young men's professional masculinity in the evolving public sphere and appealed to both working-class and middle-class men. The Melbourne University Debating Society, modeled on the Oxford University Union Society, was established by Charles Pearson in 1874 to debate and discuss various contemporary issues and provide an apprenticeship for future leaders in public life. Among its members were the teenage Alfred Deakin, who would later serve three terms as prime minister; William Shiels, premier of Victoria in the 1890s; H. B. Higgins, future attorney-general and presiding judge over the Australian basic wage case; H. N. P. Wollaston, first permanent head of the Commonwealth Department of Trade and Customs; Alexander Sutherland, a prominent Melbourne headmaster; T. F. Bride, chief librarian of the Melbourne Public Library; and Theodore Fink, a prominent educationist and chairman of directors of the Melbourne *Herald*.[30] Working-class organizations also aimed to nurture skills such as eloquence, public oratory, and debating. The North Melbourne Literary and Debating Association, for example, nominated "readings for working men" that consisted of "extracts from the writings of the leading thinkers of the age upon political and social subjects of interest and value to working men." The Young Men's Christian Association emerged from similar efforts to expose Christian young men to

[27] E. A. Martin, *The Life and Speeches of Daniel Henry Deniehy* (Melbourne, 1884). See also James Perrin Warren, *Culture of Eloquence: Oratory and Reform in Antebellum America* (University Park, Pa., 1999); Alexandro Portelli, *The Text and the Voice: Writing, Speaking and Democracy in American Literature* (New York, 1994); Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2000); Donald M. Scott, "The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of American History* 66, no. 4 (March 1980): 791–809.

[28] Martin, *The Life and Speeches of Daniel Henry Deniehy*, 22, 4.

[29] See Rev. John C. Symons, *The History and Advantages of Young Men's Associations* (Melbourne, 1856).

[30] John Tregenza, *Professor of Democracy: The Life of Charles Henry Pearson, 1830–1894* (Melbourne, 1968), 69.

"mutual improvement classes."[31] Catholic clubs and societies that formed at this time also promoted the practice of correct speech and eloquence in public, while Mechanics' Institutes from their early inception in the 1850s conducted lectures, debates, and "penny readings."[32]

Elocution figured formally in the curriculum of working-class education. It was on the very first syllabus of the Working Men's College (later the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) when the school opened in 1887. That year, 57 students were enrolled in elocution. Enrollments increased over the next few years. In 1891, 125 students were studying elocution and voice production under the Reverend A. Macully. Elocution was taught at the college until 1938.[33] Although the attraction of elocution transcended class lines, the class dimension of elocution teachings was pronounced. It was owing to the "slovenly habits acquired in early youth," one elocutionist asserted, that the worst pronunciations occurred, as in the following instances:

good and bad—are converted into—good-an-bad
cause and effect " " cause-en-effect
loaves and fishes " " loaves-un-fishes[34]

During the mid-nineteenth century, elocution manuals and public performances also reflected the centrality of speech and language to promoting "civil" society and British values. Leading figures such as the elocutionist Thomas Padmore Hill, author of the enormously successful manual *The Oratorical Trainer* (1862) and founder of the Melbourne Elocution Society, stressed these values. In his book (which went into an astounding fourteen editions), Hill emphasized the importance of vocal delivery in reading aloud and in speaking. The principles he outlined were modeled on the standard principles of elocution: inflection ("Destitute of these, reading degenerates into those dreary mechanical monotones"), correct pronunciation ("without which no public speaker ought to be tolerated by an intelligent audience"), modulation ("What light and shade are to a picture, that is modulation to speech"), judicious pausation ("In reading they . . . hesitate, they stammer, they hurry, they mumble"), and earnestness ("be it remembered, sounds are nothing without SOULS in them"). Clarity, not volume, was the key. "Many speakers, when rising to address a large assembly, seem to be under the impression that, in order to be well heard, it is necessary to speak at the top of their voices. This is a great mistake. *Clearness*, not *loudness*, ensures audibility." What was abundantly clear was that elocution was not value-free; it was one of the quintessential ways in which English values and institutions were sustained and perpetuated.[35]

According to Hill, listening to the eloquent sound of perfectly pronounced language was central to elocution. Good elocution also had to be easy on the ear. To

[31] *Argus*, August 6, 1866, 4.

[32] See *Catholic Advocate*, April 6, 1878, 9; L. B. McCalman, *Pioneer and Hardy Survivor: The Prahan "Mechanics" since 1854* (Melbourne, 1983), 11, 15.

[33] Report of the Working Men's College for the year 1887 and Prospectus for 1888; Secretary's Report for the year 1887; Prospectus and Timetable of the Working Men's College, March 1888; in Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology Archives, Melbourne; Stephen Murray-Smith and Anthony John Dare, *The Tech: A Centenary History of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology* (Melbourne, 1987), 37.

[34] Thomas Padmore Hill, *The Oratorical Trainer: A System of Vocal Culture*, 8th ed. (Melbourne, 1876), 31.

[35] Ibid., 41, 37, 51, 68, 74, 23, 91–112.

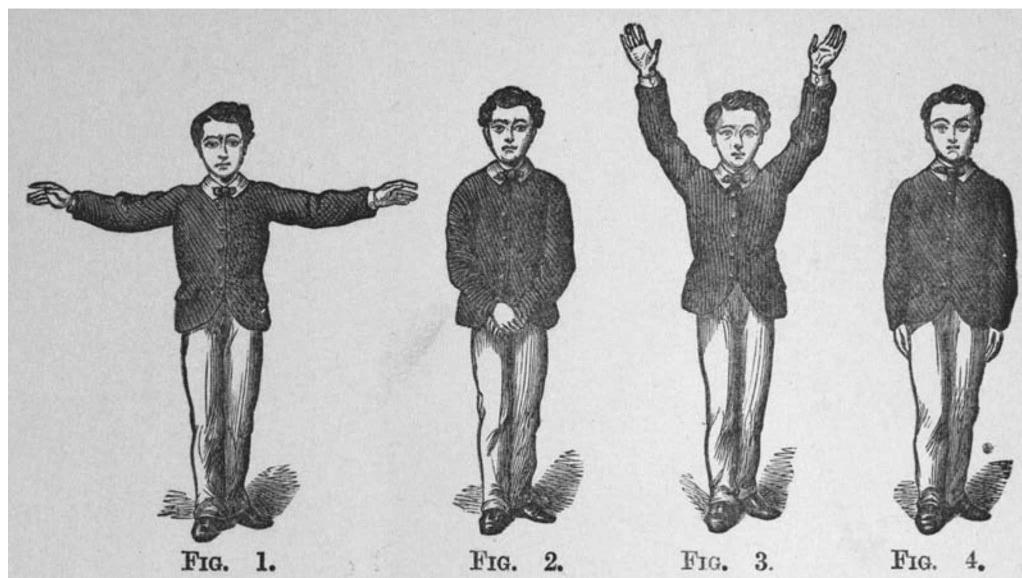


FIGURE 1: The posture of the body was considered to be essential in the delivery of elocution. In this diagram, the pupils in a group elocution class are arranged in a semicircle. Fig. 1: "Arms extended—hands on shoulders"; Fig. 2: "First position" ["The pupils make a graceful curve with their arms"]; Fig. 3: "Second position" ["The pupils *elevate* their arms"]; Fig. 4: "Third position" ["The pupils *drop* their arms"]. From Thomas Padmore Hill, *The Oratorical Trainer: System of Vocal Culture*, 8th ed. (Melbourne, 1876), inside cover, 41. La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.

be avoided was "a false school of elocution . . . a school in which a grotesque art substitutes an elongated and disagreeable drawl for the simplicity and beauty of nature." Elocution was indeed the "subject of sounds."[36] But it was *English* sounds that were valued. The school inspector W. F. Gates observed in 1897 that one of the simplest yet most effective means of achieving eloquent voice production was "the reading aloud of some piece of dignified, sonorous English, such as Milton or Ruskin. Half-an-hour a week so spent will do much for the voice, and also, strange it may seem, for the health. It must be confessed that a teacher's model reading is often far from being what it should. Justice is not done to English *sounds*."[37] The experience of listening to such sounds was believed to be morally uplifting. Writing in the *Australasian Schoolmaster* in September 1880, "JMJ" characterized the "elevating influences" of elocution as "simply inestimable." He characterized the teaching of elocution as the "study of language and its proper expression; the structure of the voice; modulations in tone . . . the almost inestimable good of bringing the youthful minds in contact with the great master-minds of the past and present."[38]

The vast majority of public speakers were men. As Marjorie Theobald has pointed out, universities, learned societies, and grammar schools, all of which promoted the cultivation of public speech, were unavailable to women.[39] With some

[36] Ibid., 50, 74.

[37] Inspector W. F. Gates, "The Teacher's Eye, Ear and Voice," *Australasian Schoolmaster*, August 1897, 29.

[38] JMJ, "Elocution," *Australasian Schoolmaster*, September 1880, 40.

[39] Marjorie Theobald, *Knowing Women: Origins of Women's Education in Nineteenth-Century Australia* (Cambridge, 1996), 30.

exceptions—such as Martha Turner, a Unitarian minister who courageously spoke from the pulpit; and later the woman's rights advocate Catherine Spence and the generation of feminists who followed her, such as Rose Scott and Vida Goldstein—women were excluded from public oratory. Women who did speak in public were at times physically attacked, and not given the privileges of their male counterparts in the circle of elocution and public-speaking societies. That is not to say that the art of speaking and speech was not important to them. On the contrary, writers such as Henry Handel Richardson and Miles Franklin, who were children during the 1890s, recall the importance of reading aloud (especially the Bible) and appreciating the sound of language and correct pronunciation. Richardson cited Tennyson and Longfellow as key poets of influence during her childhood. She said of Longfellow's "sixpenny paper-copy" of *Hiawatha*, "the rushing metre and the music of the Indian words took my ear by storm. I remember, at first reading, finding it so heady that I spent a coach-journey between Castlemaine and Maldon shouting out melodious bits to myself, for sheer joy in the sound."[40] The *Australasian Schoolmaster* insisted on the need for all schoolchildren to improve their oral composition skills. By the early twentieth century, it argued that "if the child is unable to talk correctly, most certainly will his particular foibles be reproduced when he attempts to express his thoughts in writing."[41] Both reading out loud and the art of oral storytelling were encouraged; through listening, children learned correct speech and language.[42]

Moreover, bourgeois society throughout the English-speaking world placed emphasis on the importance of speech for female self-improvement. Etiquette manuals, simultaneously distributed in New York, Melbourne, and London, promoted cultural understandings of femininity that encompassed the sound of one's voice.[43] In *Girls and Their Ways*, published in London in 1881 and written by "One Who Knows Them," it was observed that proficiency in elocution and reading aloud was a "very rare accomplishment" for a girl. It provided an important backdrop to such feminine activities as knitting, part of the pleasure of which was in the listening:

> How much more nimbly the needles are plied if they work to the cadences of a well-managed voice, which is engaged in interpreting the last new poem or history or novel to a circle of eager listeners! What a depth of significance is given to a fine passage by a skilful reader; what lights and shades she indicates in it; how she conveys the sentiment, the feeling, the heart and mind of the hearer!

This was not simply a talent one acquired; it had to be learned:

> But remember, that Reading is an art; it is no spontaneous growth; all that Nature can give is a good voice and a clear perception. The arrangement of the voice, the modulations by which every "tint" of expression is vividly reproduced, the just emphasis, the skilful inflection, the distinct articulation, the accurate pronunciation: these are graces to be acquired only by careful study and constant practice.[44]

[40] Henry Handel Richardson, *Myself When Young* (Melbourne, 1948), 76; Miles Franklin, *Childhood at Brindabella: My First Ten Years* (Sydney, 1963), 109.

[41] *Australasian Schoolmaster* 26, no. 310 (April 19, 1905): 198.

[42] *Australasian Schoolmaster* 31, no. 368 (February 16, 1910): 156.

[43] See, for example, *Complete Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen: A Guide to the Rules and Observances of Good Society* (1900), which was distributed in London, New York, and Melbourne by Ward, Lock & Co.

[44] *Girls and Their Ways: A Book for and about Girls, by One Who Knows Them* (London, 1881), 25.

The connection between speech, conversation, and character was made explicit in *Australian Etiquette; or, The Rules and Usages of the Best Society*, which declared that "The character of a person is revealed by his conversation as much as any quality he possesses."[45] The values and attitudes enunciated in *Australian Etiquette* were intimately connected to notions of "civilization" and citizenship. The introduction to the volume announced that the values of etiquette promoted "peace, harmony and good-will among all people who are enjoying the blessings of more advanced civilized government."[46]

These values were also central to colonial education, especially in the elite, middle-class schools. Speech Day, which included an emphasis on elocution and vocal delivery, was an important yearly ritual that was central to school activities. There was a widespread belief that teaching children to speak correctly was important in molding character, especially in elite schools for middle-class boys such as Melbourne Grammar, Scotch College, and Wesley College, where elocution had been taught since the 1860s. However, these developments were not confined to boys' schools. "Speech" and voice were central aspects in the refinement and construction of middle-class femininity, especially as access to education was increasingly being seen as part of middle-class women's accomplishments. In *Patchwork*, the student magazine of the Presbyterian Ladies' College, voice and speech were held to be central to defining colonial femininity. Although the use of slang, recitation, reading aloud, and elocution contributed to a vocal culture that began to construct an Australian speech, it was firmly derivative of the English public school system. During the 1890s, there were elocutionary displays at the college by the pupils of the teachers Miss Veitch and George Lupton. The achievements of their elocution classes were documented in the annual reports. Under the direction of Veitch and Lupton, elocution flourished at the school, and kept to the bounds of uniform speech. In all "the classes, up to the fourth, reading is carefully taught, and every effort made to restrain the attempts of young Victorians to develop an accent or intonation of their own."[47] The public presentations of elocution were the pride of the school. Veitch was a successful elocutionist in her own right, and gave readings that inspired encores. The public performance of recitations, concerts, readings, and speeches became an essential aspect of celebrations marking the end of the school year. As Greg Dening has observed, these were "annual rites of passage," and the public examination of these rhetorical skills was a part of elite education at this time.[48]

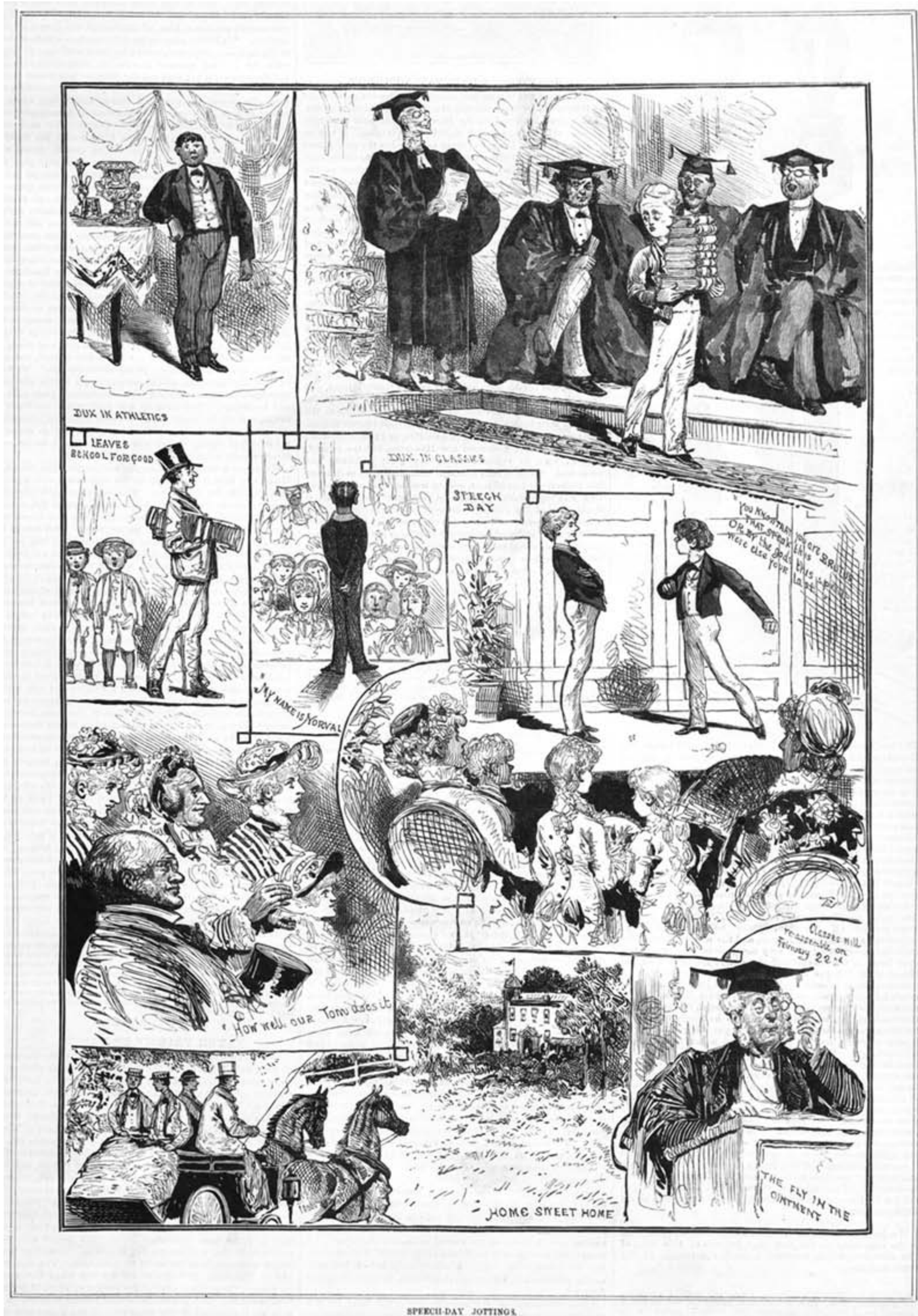
By the early years of the twentieth century, the quality of one's pronunciation and vocal articulation was seen as a reflection of one's worthiness and integrity as an individual. This is a pervasive theme in much of the Anglophile elocution literature, which during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries prescribed the view that one projected oneself to the world through one's voice. Usually written by members of the clergy, this instruction literature was characterized by an evangelical fervor and had its basis in religious interpretations of the voice as a reflection of the

[45] *Australian Etiquette; or, The Rules and Usages of the Best Society* (Melbourne, 1885), 88.

[46] Ibid., 17.

[47] Report of the Head Master to the Principal and Council to the Presbyterian Ladies' College (1897), in PLC Reports (1897–1904), State Library of Victoria, Melbourne; *Patchwork*, December 1892, 9.

[48] *Patchwork*, December 1898, 3; Greg Dening, *Xavier: A Centenary Portrait* (Melbourne, 1978), 130.



SPEECH-DAY JOTTINGS.

FIGURE 2: *Speech-Day Jottings*. November 18, 1882. La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

soul. In his distinctive Australian elocution manual *The Essentials of Elocution*, published in 1903, Frank Apted positioned elocution within a discourse of moral failure and cultural collapse. In the book, he declared elocution to be a lost art. Its main aim, he said, was "to hold the mirror up to Nature." It was, further, a colonial problem. We are "bringing deserved reproach upon ourselves for the corruption and Deterioration which have so swiftly fallen upon the use of our rich and beautiful English language in these Southern climes." It was an evil, he pronounced:

> The majority of our children are perceptibly DRIFTING into what can only be called an ABOMINABLE COLONIAL TWANG. The latter has all the faults and none of the crispness of the Cockney dialect, much of the distortion and none of the quaintness of the American accent. There is an alarmingly increasingly [*sic*] number of children whose voices are THIN AND BRASSY, whose Articulation is dull and indistinct, and who can scarcely enunciate one of the vowel sounds correctly. Why do these evils exist?

He also described a "Deplorable and Distressing habit which is being acquired by an alarmingly increasing number of our colonial children." This was the "mal-pronunciation of the vowel sounds," what he characterized as an "opprobrious twang." He did grant that the average "colonial child or adult speaks more correctly than persons in a similar station in the old country." The way in which English had been transplanted was, he believed, remarkable, and "from the homeland has produced no more serious defects than those we are now deploring." From the "seeds of the language sown in Australia," however, "scarcely anything better could have been expected." What could account for the different accent in Australia? The climate could make a difference: "It is an ascertained law that certain sounds are more easily produced in one country than in another . . . The air we breathe has an influence upon the delicate issue of the vocal organs, which in time causes the speech to become indigenous."[49]

Apted objected to any variation from Standard English, but in some quarters it was hoped that the Federation of Australian States in 1901 would produce a distinctive Australian sound. "Perhaps under Federation," reported the headmaster of Presbyterian Ladies' College in 1897, "we may be able to afford the luxury of an Australian dialect and pronunciation."[50] But for purists such as Apted, an Australian accent would always be seen as inferior to the English "mother tongue." It was a "vice" that the mother tongue was being so "abused and debased." It was imperative for all those with the "progress of real Education at heart to awake and strive to STEM THIS TIDE." Not to do so would mean forever "wearing the brand of the Uneducated and unrefined, for ever outcast from all who love the Purity and Grandeur of our mother-tongue." The voice was for Apted "a purity like the soul." Next to reason, he argued, the voice is the "most blessed and useful gift of the Creator, and reason itself is of little use without the voice; indeed the latter is the chief evidence that man has reason, and it is to be distinguished from the brute creation." Character was defined through elocution; self-reliance was to be encouraged, while self-consciousness was "offensive and reprehensible," a "terrible foe for the reciter to harbour."[51]

[49] Frank Apted, *The Essentials of Elocution, and How to Acquire Them: Being a Treatise and a Plea for Naturalness and Individuality in the Practice of the Art* (Geelong, 1903), 6, 44, 46.
[50] Report of the Head Master to the Principal and Council to the Presbyterian Ladies' College (1897).
[51] Apted, *The Essentials of Elocution*, 7, 44–45, 18.

This emphasis on speech as subjectivity was also manifest in the high value that politicians placed on eloquence. The year in which Apted's book was published, 1903, was also auspicious for both Alfred Deakin and Vida Goldstein. Deakin became prime minister for the first time that year, while Goldstein first ran for Parliament. Both were accomplished orators who made speech central to their campaigns for social change.[52]

Throughout his life, Deakin enjoyed reading aloud, formal debates, speaking in public, and arguing. His interests reflect the value that Victorians placed on oratory and the public sphere of "talkers, public speakers and preachers."[53] As John Rickard has observed, "Alfred was forever talking and writing. The classroom chatterbox became the teacher, lecturer, platform speaker and, in his private circle, the conversationalist and entertainer."[54]

Deakin judged not only the professional, but also the personal capabilities of his peers through the eloquence or otherwise of their speech. Speech was used to summarize masculine character and integrity. He described Australia's first prime minister, Edmund Barton, as someone who was

> [a] sound lawyer with a judicial dignity of speech, a fine public spirit and high sense of personal honour . . . In debate he was always cogent and impressive but involved in style and sometimes arrangement, owing to want of preparation . . . A good classic, with an original vocabulary, a noble delivery and an advocate's eye for an opponent's weak points, he was at times an excellent debater and capable of set speeches of a high order of merit.

Sir George Grey was characterized as

> [a] small stooping venerable figure with hair of silver, high in forehead, long in nose, and chin softened by age to a quiet dignity of expression. A silvery voice, a cultured English accent, a style clear, concise, persuasive and eloquent which sheathed even bitterness and innuendo in polished grace . . . upon the platform he was always deferential and in debate courteousness itself.[55]

The belief that voice was a reflection of character and capability is illustrated no better than in the case of women's attempts to enter the male-dominated world of public politics. The overtly misogynist interjections against activists such as Vida Goldstein and suffragettes in general is well documented. The conflation of voice, person, and politics is encapsulated in some of the famous phrases used by opponents of women's suffrage, such as "shrieking sisterhood" and "shrieking cockatoos." The press commented on Goldstein's femininity and her style; her vocal delivery became central to her integrity as a politician. In 1899 she was described as having "ease and fluency of speech . . . united with a charm of manner essentially womanly and this, together with the clearness and precision of her arguments, carried the audience irresistibly with her." Her voice had "clear bell like tones"; she had "an assurance of manner and precision in argument for which she became noted." Her womanly qualities were commented upon, but it was her eloquence and speech that provided

[52] James Warren considers the connection between eloquence and social change in early U.S. culture. See Warren, *Culture of Eloquence*.

[53] Andrew St George, *The Descent of Manners: Etiquette, Rules and the Victorians* (London, 1993), 78.

[54] John Rickard, *A Family Romance* (Melbourne, 1996), 51.

[55] Alfred Deakin, *The Federal Story*, ed. Herbert Brookes (Melbourne, 1944), 32, 33.

the key to interpreting her capabilities: "Her voice is alert, pleasant, feminine; her delivery could hardly be better; her magnetism—well, those who go off to scoff at future meetings will remain to admire."[56] Goldstein traversed many contemporary expectations of woman's role as mother and wife in society by campaigning vociferously in the public sphere. In the process, she challenged other views and assumptions about the feminine voice, and the appropriate sound of that voice in public. Writing in *Etiquette in Australia* in 1911, the author Mrs. Erskine acknowledged that times had changed, but she identified a quiet demeanor as a key aspect of women's femininity. One of her emphatic messages to women was "Don't be loud of voice in public places. A retiring, modest demeanour may have ceased to be fashionable, but it is much a charm in women to-day as it ever was."[57]

Both Deakin and Goldstein belonged to a generation of speakers who immersed themselves in oratorical culture; eloquence was key to their view of how social and political change would be affected. They belonged to a pre-technological era. By the time the technology of the talkies had been introduced in Australia in the late 1920s, Deakin had been dead eight years, and Goldstein had removed herself from radical politics, choosing to channel her energies into Christian Science.

THE INTRODUCTION OF TALKIES took place against the backdrop of discussions of what would come to be referred to as "Australian-English," which was a local variant of the received English pronunciation. By the interwar years, there was considerable public discussion about the Australian sound, but often little agreement. Some wished for a nation of neutral speakers; others argued for the need for a distinctive Australian accent, while there was continued support for an accent derived from the British. "We would define Australian-English," wrote one newspaper correspondent who favored a more neutral sound,

> as that pleasant oral communication which is audible and instantly apprehended by reason of its clear enunciation and rate of articulation; which is expressed in correct grammatical form and is free from solecisms; it has the vowel quality and absence of nasality associated with a person of respectable attainments, and the inflections are such as do not provoke a sense of antagonism or resentment in the auditor by virtue of such speech.[58]

English speech was regarded as an ideal, and a model; but in Australia it was also a dynamic, changing construct of the correct form of pronunciation. It was held up for emulation, taught, promoted, and used in particular public contexts (such as the theater, public addresses, and radio) as correct and as affirming a British Australia.

There was also, however, a commitment at this time to a distinctly Australian accent, and not one that simply mimicked the British model. In 1930, the *Sun* re-

[56] Janette M. Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman: Vida Goldstein* (Melbourne, 1993), 25, 65.

[57] Mrs. Erskine, *Etiquette in Australia* (Sydney, 1911), 60.

[58] *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 28, 1933, 6. For this history, see Graham Seal, *The Lingo: Listening to Australian English* (Sydney 1999); Sidney J. Baker, *The Australian Language: An Examination of the English Language and English Speech as Used in Australia, from Convict Days to the Present, with Special Reference to the Growth of Indigenous Idiom and Its Use by Australian Writers* (1945; 2nd ed., Sydney, 1966).

ported that "if our speech is purely Australian, always providing that it is not a debasement, there is no cause for regret. Rather it is a reason for pride. Mimicry is a confession of inferiority." It was held that this speech should come from an authentic local connection with culture. "We desire," continued the *Sun*, "that our national speech be cultivated as a genuine expression of thought by a people whose opportunities for culture are exceptional, and if it have a distinctive Australian quality so much the better." There was nothing worse than when Australians tried to imitate the English: "Forgetting that he is an Australian and ought to have individuality enough to be true to his type, he becomes a weak imitator from pure affectation. There is sometimes the sorry spectacle of a returned Australian trying to pass off a poor limitation of the Oxford drawl, or bespattering his conversation with the 'dreadfully beautiful,' 'awfully gorgeous' tags that are plainly imported."[59]

Some Australian forms of popular culture attempted to capture a distinctive style of speech and sound that challenged the formality of elocution. There were distinctive vernaculars that emerged in both the bush and the city, but these soon merged. C. J. Dennis's popular verse in the early twentieth century is an example of an individualized style that was spoken where elocution was not to be found, such as the workplace, the streets, and the schoolyard. Ginger Mick, a key character in Dennis's verse, is a rough, masculine larrikin from inner Melbourne who takes pride in speaking in a crude voice, clipping his words, elongating his sounds, and using slang expressions. In the opening verse of *The Moods of Ginger Mick*, we learn that "'e quickly dropped 'is aitches, so as not to be mistook / Fer an edjicated person." Although Dennis enjoyed great success, his verse was in fact a middle-class representation; the vernacular was highly exaggerated and owed its tradition to a heavily pronounced Cockney accent, despite the local flavor that included Australian slang.[60]

The Australian drawl celebrated by Dennis attracted its critics, who argued that it reflected a lazy, slovenly, and sloppy demeanor. Said J. Sutton Crow of the University Conservatorium, "Australians are said to be lip lazy, tongue lazy, and jaw lazy, and it is for this reason that one hears so much poor articulation among our singers." Crow was a firm believer in the lazy speech theory. "What Australians generally seem to suffer from may be called 'lip, tongue, and jaw laziness' leading to a lack of clear enunciation and a mumbling and slovenly mode of speech." Others agreed. Alfred Hart, a judge of the Melbourne Shakespeare Society, believed that mistakes in pronunciation were due to laziness and "sloppy vocalisation."[61] Such critics did not appreciate that this type of speech could in fact be seen as potentially a bulwark against American accents. Writing in 1932, the English-born Professor G. H. Cowling insisted that he was not denigrating the Australian sound, but it was clear what type of speech he preferred:

> My own view is that the Australian dialect is a thing to avoid. It is not a beautiful dialect. To call bound "baeund," moon "mewn," to confuse tie and toy, and to pronounce lady some-

[59] *Sun*, January 25, 1930, 6.

[60] Baker, *The Australian Language*, 75; C. J. Dennis, *The Moods of Ginger Mick* (Sydney, 1916), ix; John Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History* (Melbourne, 1988), 125.

[61] The quotations are, respectively, from the *Argus*, October 27, 1936, 8; November 9, 1936, 8; October 29, 1926, 10.

thing like "lydy" is ugly, to say the least . . . Do not misunderstand me. I am not attacking the Australian dialect. I think dialects are inevitable, and in their proper place they are beautiful and right. All I wish to say is that the language of educated people should be standard Australian, and not the vulgar dialect, and this could be accomplished in a generation or less if all teachers were phonetically trained.[62]

To English ears, this is often how Australian speech sounded. John Stewart, a visiting professor of English at Adelaide who briefly occupied the Jury Chair during the 1930s, described the Australian accent as "ugly," but his own Oxford accent was not welcomed, either:

I had, in fact, found Australian speech the only positively and absolutely ugly thing in that extraordinary continent, and I had there probably preserved with care—and perhaps, obtruded—the kind of modified southern English speech I had picked up partly at school but chiefly at Oxford. A pommy accent was, of course, correspondingly ungrateful to many Australians, which may be one reason why I was very seldom asked to do any broadcasting in Adelaide.[63]

The introduction of radio into Australia in 1923 had foregrounded some of these debates. There were discussions about the quality of voice and correct enunciation, but there was never any question that Australian radio would promote an English sound. Indeed, one of the perceived benefits of radio was that it brought the British Empire together for political and economic reasons, to render "entertainment and information of a British character to residents of the Empire throughout the world with a view to uniting these people more closely than ever, not only from motives of patriotism, but as a buying public for Empire goods."[64] These discussions were heightened when spoken dialogue in film was introduced throughout the world in 1928; the first such Australian film was produced in 1931. Sound production in film was a technological advance that both represented a new mode of talking and listening on the screen and created a new relationship with the audience as *listeners*. Before the introduction of the Australian variety, the American talkie dominated the screen.[65] Critics deemed the American "sound" offensive, coarse, and harsh, with a consensus that the American accent was not considered appropriate for Australian audiences. They felt that the American "twang" was undermining the foundation on which the Australian sound was based, which was English, proper, formal, and precise. In their view, American speech did not vary from region to region or class to class; to them, it sounded like one voice.

What impact would sound have on *listening* to speech on film? The *Sydney Morning Herald* described the early sound in film as "harsh and thoroughly unpleasant."[66] It was also noisy: "The nations will be a mass of nerves if there is no place where people can go for a nice quiet, peaceful hour or so of relaxation and entertainment," predicted Arnold Wheatley in *Everyones*.[67] But the sheer effort of listening and look-

[62] *All about Books* 4, no. 10 (October 1932): 154.

[63] John Innes Mackintosh Stewart, *Myself and Michael Innes: A Memoir* (London 1987), 130.

[64] *Wireless Weekly*, January 8, 1932, 8. For the English voice on Australian radio, see K. S. Inglis, *This Is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1932–1983* (Melbourne 1983), 22–24, 70.

[65] For the introduction of speech and sound on film, see Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926–1931* (New York, 1997).

[66] *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 10, 1928, 7.

[67] *Everyones*, November 7, 1928, 15.

ing was perceived as a great challenge: "If we have to concentrate upon the spoken word as well as upon the pictured action, however 'closely' the two may be made to synchronise, the 'work' essential to assimilate the entertainment will be greatly increased, while the present appeal to the eye may well be greatly diminished." The problem was even deeper than this, and more complex. The actual "effect of the spoken word upon our ears" presented a challenge. Watching a movie in silence allowed for a visualization of voices and an investment of "all the timbre and beauty that we fain would have them hold." But an untrained voice had a different kind of impact on the ears: "it will be a fatal catastrophe if these idols of ours should prove to speak harshly, or with an appalling accent, or even any of those affectations or vulgarisms which are so unfortunately common among those who have not been trained to speak properly." Actors had been trained "to act, to speak with their faces as it were, but they have not been trained, because the training was not necessary, to cultivate their voices too."[68] The problem faced by movie stars making the transition to sound was a source of intense discussion; a new projection was required as speech became an attribute of the character being performed. Some argued that the introduction of the talkies and the wireless served an important purpose—that, in the words of one Beatrice Ternan, who had written a letter to the *Herald*, it brought "before the public the overwhelming importance of the speaking voice." But a voice that was "harsh and strident, as is instanced in the majority of the talkies, results in a jumble of vibrations which perplex and confuse, producing an effect which is deleterious, especially to those who go to an entertainment to relax." In mechanical devices, "the sympathetic cadence of the voice is invariably lost. What character, what infinite variety belongs to the voice. Is this to be lost?" Not every elocution teacher was opposed to talkies or saw them as detrimental to voice purity. The leading elocutionist E. Stanley Brookes, who was eventually to work in radio, argued that audiences simply needed to adapt to different sounds. Prior to the gramophone and the telephone, he claimed, "our hearing facilities were adapted to natural sound vibrations only." The so called "talkie nerves"—"headaches, irritability, and other nervous complaints"—were simply caused by the amplified or magnified sounds that were created. Brookes predicated, "we will become accustomed to this new talkie vibration in the course of time."[69]

If sound on film was generally deemed unpleasant and unfamiliar, the American voice was considered particularly offensive. The most profound response to American talkies was the claim that they corrupted the English voice, which meant the desecration of the voice trained by elocution: correct pronunciation, clear enunciation, and the pausation, clarity, and purity of speech of the English middle classes. It was believed that the American speech heard on film had none of these qualities. Schoolteachers expressed concern about the "possible danger of contamination to the speech of schoolboys which may result from the widespread exhibition of the 'talkies.'" There was fear that unless great care was exercised, the talkies would "seriously affect the young people's pronunciation and expression." Others found the abuse of correct enunciation and pronunciation more offensive. In 1930, the delegates to a teachers' conference in Melbourne decided to request that Common-

[68] *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 27, 1928, 8.
[69] *Herald*, February 10, 1930, 6.

wealth and state ministries "exercise a stricter censorship of talking films." They "attacked the American talking pictures on the grounds that they were exercising a harmful influence on the speech of Australian children. Miss M. Flynn (Vic) who introduced the subject, said that some of the American slang amounted to obscenity." By this time, schools had introduced a standardized program of speech and enunciation into the curriculum.[70]

It was not only educators and theater performers who found such speech so offensive, but also legislators. The director of education in New South Wales, Henry Smith, declared, "The sincere and successful efforts we are making in Australian schools to maintain the high standard of spoken English will fail if our young children hear much of the execrable pronunciation of English which distinguishes most of the American talkies of to-day." He called for "legislation to enable our censors to exclude all talking pictures which desecrate the canons of pure speech as practiced among the educated classes in British communities."[71] The possibility of legislating against talkies for these reasons was also discussed in Adelaide. "Language Desecrating English," announced the *Argus* in 1929. The minister for education, Malcolm McIntosh, was asked if he was aware of "the grave and desecrating influence such pictures would have on the high standard of English taught in the schools . . . Mr. McIntosh replied that he was aware of the damaging effect some pictures would have upon the standard of English. The question was whether the Cabinet would be justified in prohibiting pictures because they did not approve the tone of English expressed in them."[72] There was a lively debate about what steps the censor should take to curtail the impact of film on Australian audiences. It was a question that went beyond mere prejudice.[73] In Melbourne, the "filthy American twang" heard in talking pictures was identified by Horace Richardson in the Legislative Council as the source of "contamination of the English language." He protested against its use, "particularly when millions of pounds were being spent to teach children to speak the English language."[74] There was a racial element in this complaint as well. As he argued in the Parliament,

> I do not, nor do I desire to hear the contemptible twang . . . At the second place, I saw scenes in which a number of American negroes appeared. I heard their dialect spoken, and I had enough of that programme too. Some of the talkie pictures are lowering the standard of the English language. We spend millions of pounds in teaching the children to speak the English language, and these shows are contaminating it.[75]

Linguists assert that the very notion that one English dialect can somehow influence another is problematic. Pam Peters believes that it is difficult to argue for a sustained American influence on the Australian accent; what is apparent over time is an extension of existing Australian linguistic patterns and sounds as the system of speech

[70] The quotations are, respectively, from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 6, 1929, 10; January 8, 1930, 14.

[71] *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 7, 1929, 15.

[72] *Argus*, August 9, 1929, 10.

[73] *Everyones*, August 14, 1929, 24.

[74] *Argus*, October 31, 1929, 8.

[75] Victorian Legislative Council, October 30, 1929, in *Victorian Parliamentary Debates*, Session 1929 (Melbourne 1930), 2640.

remains intact.[76] These fine distinctions and subtle arguments were lost, however, on contemporary commentators, who were not linguists themselves. They characterized the introduction of the American sound as a cultural invasion and understood it through the discourse of moral panic.

THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT CENSOR, W. Creswell O'Reilly, was crucial in these discussions. In his view, the American accent and voice were contemptible. He conflated them with immorality, polluting young minds, and promoting bad character. O'Reilly, an ardent conservative Christian, believed that not only were films introducing unsavory values into the community, but they were destroying British values and the eloquence of speech. As a great supporter of silent films, he was damning of what talkies were introducing into Australian cultural life. In 1929, his annual report advocated that more British films be imported:

> It is a marvel that the public will stand such large doses of the prevalent slang and accent, excruciating on an English ear, especially in the reproduction of the alleged singing and speaking of modern American girls. For the sake of the cinematic art, it is to be hoped that the silent film will not yet lapse into the limbo of things forgotten. Sound is hastening the Americanisation of the Australian people, but unfortunately censorship can do little or nothing to curb this tendency. The only remedy is an increased number of good British films.[77]

Another critic of American films was Beatrice Tildesley, the president of the Good Film League and the Sydney-based Film Society. In the latter organization, which she helped to form in 1931, speech was identified as an important aspect of British and therefore Australian culture. The constitution recognized this explicitly when it referred to "the importance of the moving picture as affecting ideals of taste, speech, and conduct," and declared that "speech and subject matter [should] reflect life that embodies the traditions and ideals, first of British civilisation."[78] These values were also explicitly enshrined in the principles of censorship, among which was "likely to be offensive to the people of the British Empire." British morality, manners, and ethics were all combined in the nature of speech.[79] Tildesley did, however, argue for the promotion of Australian film. She wanted "films dealing with present-day life and conditions among ordinary people in Australia . . . telling a straightforward tale realistically so that the true Australian atmosphere pervades it."[80] The *Sydney Morning Herald* also observed the way in which American films were a threat to Australian values:

> Without doubt, the American films have antagonized a large section of the Australian community. Many people associate talking films exclusively with stories of the underworld, or of life behind the scenes in vaudeville—sordid stuff, full of Bowery accent, and of that peculiarly aggressive kind of repartee which the Americans call "wisecracks" . . . Some of the American films screened in Sydney have been ugly and raucous.[81]

[76] Pam Peters, "Australian English," in Bell and Bell, *Americanization and Australia*, 32–41.
[77] *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 16, 1930, 17.
[78] Quoted in Matthews, *Dance Hall and Picture Palace*, 236.
[79] Beatrice Tildesley, "The Cinema in Australia," *Australian Quarterly*, December 15, 1930, 94–95.
[80] *Australian Women's Weekly*, February 10, 1931, 4.
[81] *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 17, 1930, 13.

The *Argus* editorialized one of the particularly offensive aspects of American films: the speech and behavior of the characters. "The strident, nasal utterances of many American film actresses may not fall harshly upon the American ear," but Australians "would be staggered by the idea that any strange girl may be addressed by a breezy young man as 'honey,' 'cutie' or 'sweetie,' which appears an old American custom. Similarly, we may not know that a 'tuxedo' is a dinner jacket or that a dress suit is sometimes humorously called a 'soup-and-fish.' We may be unaware what a 'yegg' is, or what befalls him when he is 'bumped off.' " "The real danger of too many American talking films," it warned, "is that there is growing up a generation which knows no other kind," whose values would be perverted.[82]

Less vocal were the supporters of the talkies, who saw the benefits of being exposed to a range of speaking styles. *Everyones*, the leading film journal, made the following observation:

> The talkies, by bringing even widely different spoken dialects before Australians, perform a good service. To hear other accents and modulations is a common experience, and far from being hurtful may actually prove to be an advantage. The fine speakers of Dublin and Edinburgh flourish against a background of dialect from which they, perhaps, even draw strength. Therefore, it may well be that Australians will become all the better judges and users of English from being able to compare their own with the speech of others.[83]

The changing nature of languages needed to be recognized, as did the resilience of the English language. The talkies were a cause for celebration: "let us be thankful for a new and delightful experience, which is likely to enlarge the knowledge and understanding of thousands of people," declared *The Illustrated Tasmanian Mail*:

> The question may be asked just what is it that these critics find so baneful in the English of American film actors? Some, notably the men, and particularly John Barrymore, Warner Baxter, and Charles Rogers, reach a standard that would be respected in England itself. The women, for the most part, are not so good, but we may name Lola Lane and Dorothy Burgess as examples of film actresses who speak charmingly. Others, it is true, fall short of the highest standard of speech, but if they cannot be recommended as models to be slavishly copied, it will do Australian children no harm to listen discriminatingly to the pure vowels which most of these performers appear to command.[84]

Perhaps the most influential and vocal supporter of the talkies was the Australian director Charles Chauvel. Described as "one of the strongest directorial voices of early Australian cinema," Chauvel was a major force behind the development of the nascent Australian film industry in the 1920s.[85] After a visit to Hollywood in 1928, he returned converted to the transition to sound. With the coming of talkies, he observed how "the cold silent moving picture has breathed into it the breath of life and has become a living, vibrant thing." The audiences that he witnessed in America did not in fact find it difficult to listen to speech on film: "I watched the audience lean forward with rapt attention while the players were speaking and saw them relax, sit back and whisper comments when the talking ceased and the old familiar title flashed on. To them the

[82] *Argus*, September 13, 1930, 20.
[83] *Everyones* 10, no. 499 (September 11, 1929): 24.
[84] As cited in ibid.
[85] Brian McFarlane, Geoff Mayer, and Ina Bertrand, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film* (Melbourne, 1999), 63.

picture was once more a dead thing, without life, until another talking sequence occurred." He believed that "the advent of the 'talking' picture was most timely" and that it would "prove to be a great and needed stimulant," and he was keen to see how well England and Australia would make use of it.[86]

While legislators and politicians expressed a sense of linguistic moral panic, the Australian public embraced the talkies with overwhelming enthusiasm. Although the critical reception of the first talkie released in Australia, *The Jazz Singer*, was mixed, the audience response was anything but ambivalent. The film showed for a staggering forty-six weeks in 1928–1929 at Sydney's Lyceum theater, setting an Australian record. Westerns and detective stories appealed to audiences, as did Shakespeare and historical dramas, which emerged in the 1930s. In 1935, *Everyones* recorded that the year's most successful films included *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Anna Karenina*, *David Copperfield*, and *Cleopatra*. Musicals were extremely popular; *Gold Diggers of Broadway* was one of the hits of 1930. As Diane Collins observes, musicals were regularly included on the annual list of box-office hits, as Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Judy Garland, Bing Crosby, and Betty Grable consistently figured in popularity polls. Not all the popular films were escapist entertainment, however. The acclaimed war film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) became one of the most successful talkies in Australia. British imports doubled between 1930 and 1932, and there were many that were popular, including *Pygmalion* and *The Private Life of Henry the VIII*. But by the end of the 1930s, 75 percent of the films shown in Australia were still imported from Hollywood.[87]

Another import from Hollywood was the picture palace, which provided a luxurious and opulent setting within which to view the talkies. By the end of the 1920s, the cinema chain Hoyts had built its Regent cinemas in the major capital cities. The Sydney Regent boasted a Renaissance façade, with a dress circle foyer, lavish fittings, and seating for three thousand people. Rival picture houses built by Union Theatres included the Sydney Capitol, Perth's Ambassador's Theatre, the Brisbane Tivoli, and the Sydney and Melbourne state theaters. These, too, were extravagant, ostentatious, and opulent; the Melbourne and Sydney state theaters boasted marble staircases, colored domes, Gothic entrance halls, and period lounges.[88] Writer and political commentator Donald Horne remembers that when he was growing up with the talkies as a teenager, the cinemas gave Sydney "much of its significance. The big 'picture shows' were its true cathedrals."[89] Going to the movies was a delight for him, but his recollections would also have confirmed the worst fears of contemporary critics. When he arrived from rural New South Wales with his family in Sydney in 1935 at the age of fourteen,

> [t]he language of city boys seemed different, more like tough talk in American movies. In particular, conversation was made barren with a constant repetition of sceptical "O yeahs?" Like "O.K.," "Oh yeah?" was only just coming in, and boys would spend minutes trying to

[86] The quotations are, respectively, from *Everyones* 9, no. 446 (September 19, 1928): 14; 9, no. 455 (November 14, 1928): 8; 10, no. 476 (April 3, 1929): 24.

[87] Diane Collins, *Hollywood Down Under: Australians at the Movies, 1896 to the Present Day* (Sydney, 1987), 65, 66, 69, 71.

[88] Richard Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure: A History of Australian Popular Culture since 1788* (Melbourne, 1995), 176.

[89] Donald Horne, *The Education of Young Donald* (Sydney, 1967), 125.

out-scorn each other with its use. "Oh yeah?" a boy would say, pulling himself up and glaring at his rival as if that was the end of the matter. "Yeah!" the other boy would reply, equally challengingly. "Oh yeah?" . . . "Yeah!" "Oh yeah?" . . . "Yeah!" . . . and so on, until someone tired of it . . . [S]ome of these boys talked so bleakly that it seemed to deaden the senses.[90]

In 1926, the Australian government censors pleaded for "a little more refinement and less vulgarity" in imported films. They looked forward to a time when British films would compete with the American cinema and endeavored to encourage the showing of British films in Australia. Indeed, they suggested that it might be necessary to "demand by Act of Parliament that a definite percentage of the Films shown here should be British."[91]

The introduction of American talkies into Australian cultural life during the interwar years highlights the importance of accents, language, and voice in defining national character and identity. Situating the critical response to the introduction of American sound on film within a broader history of pronunciation, elocution, and voice reflects the wider historical importance accorded to the belief that the eloquence of speech reflected one's character and was informed explicitly by understandings of class, gender, and national identity. It also, more specifically, points to how the purity and unity of the English language at one time defined "Australianness." Such an emphasis on the auditory and language can also highlight what Barry Truax refers to as a "community of listeners." The concept of an "acoustic community"—one that is able to "bind the community together and contribute to its character" through sound and listening—can frame our understanding of the sound of speech and its elocution as a central, yet overlooked, aspect of the cultural history of perception.[92]

[90] Ibid., 112.
[91] "Commonwealth Film Censorship: Report on the Work for the Year 1927," in *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers, 1926–1928* (Canberra, 1928), 5.
[92] Barry Truax, *Acoustic Communication* (Norwood, N.J., 1984), 61.

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