

A. J. Aitken

Letters to *The Scotsman* on the subject of accent (1956, 1977)¹

Edited by Caroline Macafee, 2015

Editor's note: AJA and his colleague David Abercrombie were both active in the 1950s in trying to persuade the BBC to employ Scottish-accented announcers. AJA's 1956 letters were contributions to a debate that ran for several months in the letters pages of the *Scotsman*. Numbers 1 and 2 below were given prominence in the 'Points of view' section.

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1. 28 July 1956

B.B.C.'S OFFICIAL VOICE ACCENT AN INTRUDER IN SCOTLAND

To the EDITOR of "THE SCOTSMAN"

Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue, 27 George Square, Edinburgh, July 25, 1956

Sir, – Besides differentiating between "whales" and "Wales" (or "wails"), the Scottish speaker has a (slight) advantage over the speakers of English of the public school of B.B.C. type, in that, unlike them, he differentiates in pronunciation between "tied" and "tide," "sighed" and "side," between "fir," "fur" and "(de)fer," between "soared," "sword" and "sawed," and in parallel cases.

Conversely, however, he loses some of this advantage by himself failing to differentiate between "pool" and "pull," "fool" and "full," between "ant" and "aunt," and between "cot" and "caught," whereas the public school speaker of English does distinguish these pairs. But on balance the Scottish speaker probably has it with fewer ambiguities of this sort, especially if we oppose him to those English speakers who pronounce alike "pyre," "power," and "Pa."

In practice it does not appear as yet that such doublets give rise to any more difficulty in comprehension than the very numerous other sets of homophones which are common to all the accents of standard English, like, say, "meat" and "meet." The context will generally leave no doubt whether "whales" or "wails" or "Wales" or whether "pool" or "pull" is intended, just as the context tells us whether to interpret a certain set of articulations as "sight" or "site."

I do not, therefore, believe that there is much to choose in intelligibility, or, for that matter, in æsthetic quality, between the various Scottish accents of standard English on the one hand

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and any other of the educated accents with which standard English is spoken on the other – as for instance the type of English accent favoured by the B.B.C., the various educated American accents, the Australian, the Irish, the provincial English, or the middle-class London accent. Nor do I think that one ought to complain of B.B.C. announcers or any other speakers who employ, doubtless quite naturally and innocently, the accent they acquired in their youth, albeit sometimes with slight inconsistencies or variations in pronunciation. But I am very much at one with Mr Hunter and Mr Carter in disliking the B.B.C.’s policy in the matter of the accents of English of their announcing staff.

The official voice of the B.B.C. agrees in its accent with a small, exclusive minority of the population of Britain – that section of the population which has had the good fortune to attend one of the English or English-type public schools. In England, the English regional accents – both the provincial accents of, say, Leeds or Birmingham and that of the Londoner not of the public school class – do not occur among the announcers employed by the B.B.C. It is still more astonishing that the Scottish B.B.C. recruits its announcing staff exclusively from those who either manage perfectly the accents of the English public school or one but slightly differentiated from it, instead of, as might have been hoped, from those Scots who use accents which are native to this country and rooted in the Scottish linguistic situation, the kind of Scottish accents indicated in the first paragraph of this letter.

The Scottish accents of standard English arose originally out of the native broad Scots dialects and still retain a close phonetic relationship with them. This serves as a valuable linguistic bridge between standard English as spoken in Scotland and the native dialects and, in consequence, a social bridge between the mainly dialect-using and the mainly standard English-using sections of Scottish society. The B.B.C.-favoured accent is an intruder which has no place in this situation.

Scotland must, I suppose, be the only English-speaking nation to be treated in this humiliating way. I am informed, for example, that American broadcasting companies normally have as announcers people who use the local form of educated American English. How, one wonders, would the American citizenry react if local broadcasting stations began employing as announcers only those with “Limey” accents? True, the members of the hereditary Scottish Peerage and some other wealthy Scots are accustomed to attending “good” (i.e. English public) schools, where the accent the B.B.C. favours is acquired. Linguistically, at any rate, they thereby cut themselves off from the great bulk of the Scottish population. But why must the Scottish B.B.C. follow this unfortunate example?

– I am &c.

A. J. Aitken

2. 25 August 1956

SCOTTISH B.B.C.'S CHOICE OF ACCENTS "SHOULD RING THE CHANGES"

To the EDITOR of "THE SCOTSMAN"

Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue, 27 George Square, Edinburgh, August 23, 1956

Sir, – Setting aside as of minor importance a comparatively small number of local usages like the Scottish "the length of" for "as far as" or the American "truck" for "lorry," there is one fairly uniform dialect of standard English which is used throughout the English-speaking world, and which can be regarded as having its ideal or archetypal realisation in the written or printed word: the standard English dialect is literary English. This dialect is capable of spoken realisation through any one of a number of regional or social accents.

It may be that there is a tendency for everyone who speaks standard English to regard his own accent – whichever this may happen to be – as the normal one and all the others as variants of this. Also, when someone is described as speaking "without an accent" this simply means that he has the accent which the person describing him has chosen to regard as "normal." In short, judgements about the normal in accents are relative ones: there is no absolute normal in accent. In this connection expressions like "pure English" are really meaningless.

For most of us the accent which we ourselves use is not of our own choosing (though it may be the choice of our parents): rather, it is something which happens to us, and depends on the local and social environment of our childhood and the school we attended. The Scottish B.B.C. is more fortunate. It can choose the accent or accents of English which it (that is, its announcers and commentators) uses.

In practice, there would seem to be three or four possible choices. It may choose to employ one of the regional or class accents which are native to England. It may, for instance, and at present in fact does, choose to follow the English B.B.C. in employing as its official accent one which is normal to the English and Scottish social class which attends English public schools. Or it can select one of the various regional varieties of Scottish accent, for example, the East Scottish accent of such schools as Watson's or Heriot's or Dunfermline High. Or, since it employs more than one announcer, it can ring the changes on several of the principal regional accents of Scotland.

I have myself no doubt that the right choice, which would best fit in with the existing linguistic situation in Scotland, is the last. In Scotland, accent forms as yet little bar to social mobility, and the ordinary local accents are, either as they stand or with a small number of minor adjustments, still perfectly acceptable for educated or "polite" purposes. This is a just and genuinely democratic state of affairs.

In England, however, there is a definite "accent bar" between the socially favoured public school (or B.B.C.) accent and the socially stigmatised regional accents. Why, therefore, the Scottish B.B.C. should lend support to the idea that public school English is the preferable form of speech in Scotland is hard to understand.

It is nonsense to suggest that any Scotsman would find it difficult to understand the Scottish accents of standard English from regions other than his own (another Scottish dialect is, of course, quite a different matter). It is true that to understand an accent to which one is quite unaccustomed (as, for instance, one of the Southern English or more out-of-the-way American accents would be for a Scotsman) demands a little effort of adjustment – a sort of acclimatisation. But with familiarity comes complete ease. Even this, however, would scarcely be called upon within Scotland.

Would Scottish people really object on more subjective grounds to the use of Scottish accents by the B.B.C. announcers? We have now been trained to expect “B.B.C. English” from the B.B.C. announcers, and the insidious idea has doubtless been planted in some minds that this is, in some way, the “best” or most “cultured” or most elegant accent of English. But this too, is soon dispelled with habit. Would a Scottish congregation refuse to call a new minister because he used a Scottish and not a B.B.C. English accent?

– I am &c.

A. J. Aitken

3. 17 September 1956

What to call the B.B.C.

Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue, 27 George Square, Edinburgh, September 13, 1956

Sir, – You, sir, assert that “British” and “Scottish” should not be pronounced “English”. The converse is also true. In view of the accent of standard English which the authorities of the British Broadcasting Corporation, Scotland, have selected as its official one, perhaps they should consider whether the title English Broadcasting Corporation, Scotland, would not be more accurate. – I am &c.

A. J. Aitken

[Or, as they might prefer, Scotland Region. – ED.]²

4. 17 February 1977

BBC should broaden its accents

13 Lockharton Gardens, Edinburgh, February 11, 1977

Sir, – What happens in the make-believe world of historical drama, such as the dramatic parts of Dr Marinell Ash’s programmes of Scots history, no doubt does play some subliminal part in reinforcing or weakening traditional value-judgements and myths about the various dialects and accents current in Scotland today. Dr Donaldson and Professor Stewart are, therefore, right to remind Dr Ash and her colleagues of their responsibilities in this respect.

Also important is what happens when the BBC speaks not through fiction but in the public or “real” voice of its mouthpieces – its announcers, news-readers, magazine-programme anchor-men and interviewers; such people as Harry Gray, Douglas Brock, Howard Lockhart, James Cox, Douglas Kynoch, Mary Marquis, Joanna Hickson, Michael Elder, Dorothy Young, Doreen Taylor.

With a few exceptions like Donald McCormick and Jamieson Clarke, all of these have “Received Pronunciation” accents or Scots accents which closely approximate to RP. On the sports programmes and “Farm Journal,” it is true, one hears much more fully Scottish Scots accents, albeit of types more characteristic of middle-class than of working-class Scots speakers.

The accents most typical of speakers with working-class backgrounds remain unheard except in kitchen-sink drama in genre vignettes like, I suppose, Dr Ash’s “Doon the watter”

² Original note.

sketch, and when being exploited as sources of fun, and occasionally of course from people interviewed; from them one does indeed hear a much more widely representative range of Scots (and English) accents. BBC England is no better: it too runs much the same pecking-order of class accents.

Thi reason a talk wia BBC accent iz coz yi widny wahnt mi to talk about thi trooth wia voice lik wanna yoo scruff.³

But in thus continuing to exalt the BBC accent is the BBC not falling behind the times? It does seem that RP and near-RP accents prevail among the BBC's mouthpieces to an extent much in excess of the proportion of speakers with such accents within the community as a whole, and to a greater extent than is warranted by the importance of this group of speakers to the community. Most of all is this the case in Scotland.

Is it not time that the BBC enlarged its range of official accents so as to make these more representative of the community it serves? Admittedly this would be certain to evoke unfavourable reactions from some listeners, since dialect and accent prejudice is deeply entrenched among the attitudes and values current in British, including Scottish, society, as Dr Ash and Mrs Eileen Stewart have, it appears, already found.

But should it be the BBC's aim to reinforce these arbitrary and unjust prejudgements, or to progress towards a more democratic policy in its choice of accents, so helping the cause of accent tolerance?

A. J. Aitken

³ The quotation is from Tom Leonard's poem, 'Unrelated Incidents – No.3'. The full text is available online <http://www.tomleonard.co.uk/main-publications/intimate-voices/the-six-oclock-news.html> (accessed 4 August 2014).