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**Speaking Our Language: The Story of Australian English**

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The ABC's language research specialist, Irene Poinkin, reviews *Speaking Our Language: The Story of Australian English*, on the history of Australian English and how it developed to give voice to Australian identity.

**Transcript**

**Irene Poinkin**: The 'story of Australian English' is told chronologically from 1770 when words with Indigenous roots, like 'kangaroo' and 'quoll', were collected by Joseph Banks and Captain James Cook, and I'd like to discuss two aspects of that that are especially interesting to me: how the Australian accent was forged, and the core values that are reflected in our vocabulary and idiom.

In his introduction Moore claims that 'we are now in a position to state quite firmly what happened in Australia', and draws on the work of Edgar W. Schneider, who proposed a five-stage development scenario that any speech community is likely to undergo. Let's look at what Moore sketches out for us.

Where did the Australian accent come from? Moore convincingly rules out the common belief that Australian English is a form of Cockney. As he says, 'the term Cockney was used from the 17th century to describe a person born in the city of London, but it was not until the end of the 19th century ... that the term Cockney is used to describe "the speech of members of the lower socio-economic classes of London"'(p. 69). While there are some similarities between Australian and Cockney vowels and diphthongs, these sounds also appear in other south-of-England dialects. So Moore concludes that the Australian accent doesn't originate in Cockney.

The convicts, administrators and military staff spoke with a variety of British accents, particularly the accents of south-eastern England. The first 60 years of the colony was a period when the most extreme dialectal elements were being eliminated from the Australian range of sounds. People were keen to be understood by others, so they modified their speech in what Moore describes as a process of 'levelling', so that the Australian accent was already established by the early 1830s. Moore is able to give authoritative evidence that Ned Kelly, who was born in 1855, must have spoken with an Australian accent, not an Irish one as portrayed by Heath Ledger in the 2003 film *Ned Kelly*, or earlier by Mick Jagger.

For the first two-thirds of the 19th century, the general attitude towards the new Australian dialect, and in particular 'the report card on the quality of Australian vowels and diphthongs', was 'overwhelmingly positive', says Moore, and 'this accent continued to be spoken without any significant negative commentary until at least the 1880s' (p. 76). Then something changed and, I quote: '... in the late 1880s, and especially in the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, there develops a prescriptivist attitude towards Australian vowels and diphthongs - they are being judged against an "ideal" or "standard" pronunciation recently "invented" in England, and the way Australian English diverges from that putative standard is increasingly noted' (p. 126).

I have quoted this in full because this is where Moore really grabbed my attention - because of my interest in anything that sheds light on why some people have such rigid views about what is or isn't acceptable Australian English pronunciation and usage. Moore goes on to explain that this 'recently "invented"' standard was a concept that became known as Received Pronunciation (or RP for short). And that's where the rot seems to have set in. Australian school inspectors and educational journals started to note 'faulty' vowel sounds in Australian speech. Moore describes this as the 'process of denigration of the Australian accent' (p. 130). It led to teaching and teaching material designed to eliminate the so-called 'Colonial twang' and Moore points out that it had 'important consequences for our understanding of the history of the Australian accent' (p. 128). In the 1960s the linguists AG Mitchell and Arthur Delbridge identified three varieties that they called Broad Australian (spoken by 34% of the population), General Australian (55%), and Cultivated Australian (11%). Moore explains that 'the major differences are heard in the articulation of the diphthongs' and that 'the vowels and diphthongs of Cultivated Australian are closest to RP' and those of Broad Australian are furthest away from RP. Importantly, he says there is no clear evidence for the existence of the Cultivated and Broad varieties in the 19th century. 'Even so', he concludes, 'we are now in a better position to understand what generated the Cultivated variety - it was the product of the desire to move towards what was perceived to be the desirability of the English RP.' (p. 129)

Surprisingly, there is little evidence for the existence of Broad Australian in the 19th century. Moore cites the results of research by two Macquarie University speech scientists who studied the recordings of 12 rural men and women from central-western NSW and Tasmania who were born in the 1880s. 'The researchers were expecting to find evidence of broad accents, since Broad Australian is especially associated with rural areas, but the speakers were found to have General Australian accents. It is likely, therefore, that Broad Australian is a development that comes after the establishment of Cultivated Australian. Indeed, there is evidence that Broad Australian is a reaction to Cultivated Australian.' (p. 134)

In the first half of the 20th century, Moore identifies Cultivated Australian and Broad Australian as two extremes of a spectrum, giving voice to two very different sets of values. Cultivated Australian expressed the values of British imperialism, the idea that 'home' lies outside the borders of the Australian continent, and that linguistic correctness and notions of social hierarchy are likewise decided elsewhere. Broad Australian consciously opposed to this a set of values that looks to 'the bush tradition', egalitarianism and 'the fair go', and gives voice to this through a distinctive Australian accent and vocabulary. (p. 152)

In such a vast country, you'd expect to get a lot of regional variations in pronunciation but, in this regard, Moore agrees with AG Mitchell's 1946 judgment that pronunciation is generally uniform across the country. As Moore explains, this is because 'much of the settlement spread out from Sydney' and was, especially on the east coast, 'controlled by a centralised government bureaucracy'. In America, by contrast, regional dialects became established because there were 'various settlements by particular groups with their own interests, and little mobility between settlements' (p. 72).

One of the few regional variations we do have is in the pronunciation of words such as dance, where the choice is between /DANS/ and /DAHNS/, and Moore examines some relevant data from a survey in 1991(pp 167-8). The word graph is also included in this category and the results for it caught my eye because I've had to answer a complaint from one of the ABC's Melbourne listeners, who said he heard the word 'mispronounced' as /GRAHF/. Now, thanks to Moore's book, I can tell the listener what the data shows: 70% of Melburnians pronounce it /GRAF/ whereas 70% of Sydneysiders pronounce it /GRAHF/. So perhaps the broadcaster was not brought up in Melbourne! Let's allow him to continue pronouncing it /GRAHF/ if that's what he's used to.

People keep complaining to the ABC that we are being swamped by Americanisms, but research has shown, as Moore points out, that our language is not in any danger of being absorbed by American English or any other kind of English. In fact in the language stakes, as in sport and other fields, Australia punches well above its weight. Our accent is invulnerable. And in vocabulary and usage we give as good as we get - and then some. As Moore says, 'The extraordinary thing ... is that after sixty years of being subjected to American films, American television, and American music, the Australian accent has remained utterly unaffected by American accents. This suggests that it is the accent, even more so than the vocabulary, that is the most important linguistic marker of identity. With Cultivated Australian almost eliminated, and Broad Australian seriously in decline, in the future most Australians will speak General Australian, or, more accurately, Australian - "a nation at last"'(pp 162-3).

Moore sticks very closely to officially recorded first usages of words, avoiding anecdotal evidence that might put the true origins of a word significantly further back, and conclusively laying to rest Geoffrey Blainey's idea that the verb *to barrack* has anything to do with the Victoria Barracks (p. 98).

Coming from a non-English-speaking background, I have to admit that I, too, was bamboozled when I was first told to bring a plate to a party (p. 150). Fortunately, I figured out that I was meant to bring one with food on it. Anyway, it struck me as being odd that you'd be expected to take your own food to a party—we 'ethnics' like our food, and if we are invited to a party we expect the food to be laid on by the host, and in good measure, too.

I was intrigued to read that 'cleanskin' originally referred to unbranded cattle, developing other figurative meanings in the 20th century. For instance, it was used to refer to a person who had no criminal record - that is, no branding as a criminal. The term had previously been known to me only as a cheap liquid accompaniment to my dinner but, as Moore points out, this latter sense has only been in use in the past 20 years and, come to think of it, I don't remember hearing it in my younger days.

The blurb for *Speaking Our Language* says that here, 'for the first time ever', the story of Australian English is told. Not so; but the only book that stands comparison with Bruce Moore's book is *The Australian Language*, by Sidney John Baker, who died in 1976. Baker's book takes a similarly historical approach, but Baker concentrates on categories of words and gives a historical treatment for each - whereas, as I've discussed, Moore carries the story chronologically from 1770, with due attention to the Australian accent and its development.

Moore does make appropriate acknowledgement of Baker's solid researches, but it should be remembered that Baker's work was first published in 1945, with a second edition in 1966. Considering the intense interest Australians have shown in their language (think of Afferbeck Lauder's *[Let Stalk] Strine*, Barry Humphries, or John O'Grady, and others earlier), it is really astonishing that 50 years should pass between two such magisterial works as Baker's *The Australian Language* and Moore's *Speaking Our Language*.

On the technical side, and as befits an Oxford publication, there is an index, but it only covers 'words that receive major discussion or that are important to the argument'. It is interesting to compare the index for Moore's book with the meticulous one compiled by Sun Books for Baker's work in 1966.

The proofreading for Moore's book, by Jamie Anderson, is outstandingly good - I wasn't able to find a single blunder that the proofreader's eagle eye had missed.

Not so the typesetting. On many pages there is at least one line where the words are so closely packed that it is almost impossible to distinguish the spaces between words (seethelastlineonp.69,forexample). The Oxford imprint deserves better.

**Publications**

**Title**

Speaking Our Language: The Story of Australian English

**Author**

Bruce Moore, the director of the Australian National Dictionary Centre at the Australian National University.

**Publisher**

Oxford University Press Australia

**Credits**

**Presenter**

Maria Zijlstra

**Producer**

Tim Symonds

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