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

Bruce Moore

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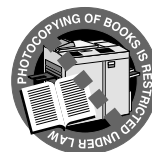
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# Introduction

The sub-title of this book, *The Story of Australian English*, derives in part from the chronological story that the book traces: the story begins with Joseph Banks and Captain James Cook collecting indigenous words such as *kangaroo* and *quoll* in northern Queensland in 1770, and it continues from there right up to the present day, when Australian English is firmly established as the natural and national language of Australia. It is a ‘story’ in another sense as well: the story of the development of Australian English is inextricably intertwined with the stories of Australian history and culture, and of the development of Australian identity. Of all the markers of identity, language is by far the most significant. This language we speak, and which gives voice to our Australian identity, is not, however, a unifacted thing. It is, as I aim to demonstrate, a multifaceted entity. Australian English is central to the process of giving voice to our Australian identity: in important ways, we are *what* we speak, and we are *how* we speak.

The book has benefited greatly from recent research into colonial Englishes. First, there has been some groundbreaking work done on New Zealand English,<sup>1</sup> and this is referred to in chapter 5 ‘Establishing the Accent’. Second, the book has benefited from the work of Edgar W. Schneider, who has put forward a model that describes how any colonial English is likely to develop, and whose research dovetails neatly into the work that has been done on New Zealand English.<sup>2</sup>

The colony that was established at Sydney in 1788 needed to come to terms with an alien world, in which the flora and fauna, and the landscape in which this flora and fauna existed, were baffling to people who carried with them a language moulded by their European heritage. To a limited extent, they took up indigenous words, and this is the topic of chapter 1 ‘Words from Indigenous Languages’. In the case of the words that were borrowed from the indigenous language that was spoken at Sydney, most of the borrowings occurred soon after settlement; the borrowings from other indigenous languages were later,

but this is only because settlement in the areas where those languages were spoken occurred later, as the frontier gradually spread out from Sydney. When indigenous words were not taken up, new coinages for flora and fauna, based on English, were produced, and there were many modifications of the meanings of existing English words to describe the very non-European landscape. These new words and meanings are discussed in chapter 2 ‘The World Upside Down: The Natural World’.

Because of the special circumstance of Australia being established as a penal colony, another important category of words was created in the early period to describe the social organisation of the convict system. The words of the convict era are discussed in chapter 3 ‘The World Upside Down: The Social World’. This chapter reveals some important tensions in convict society—tensions between the bond (the convicts) and the free (administrators, soldiers, free settlers, freed convicts), and tensions between the freed (freed convicts) and the free (those who had never been convicts)—and these are given expression in the new vocabulary that is generated. As the colony develops, with an increasing number of people born in the colony who come to regard themselves as *natives*, and with the increasing immigration of free settlers who come to regard themselves as superior to the *native-born*, further social tensions are generated and given linguistic expression. These are examined in chapter 4 ‘Currency Versus Sterling’.

In the early years of the colony, the most important development as far as Australian English was concerned was the forging of the accent. In the past there has been much argument about whether the Australian accent was transported to Australia from London or whether it was created here. If it was created in Australia, there has also been much argument about whether it was established in Sydney and then spread to the other colonies, or whether it developed independently in each of the colonies. As a result of the New Zealand research, referred to above, we are now in a position to state quite firmly what happened in Australia. The convicts, administrators, and military personnel (and later the free settlers) spoke a variety of British accents (although in the early years there were not great numbers from Scotland and Ireland), with some emphasis on the accents of south-eastern England. The new Australian dialect was created by a ‘levelling’ of the various dialects that were spoken, and this process is described in chapter 5 ‘Establishing the Accent’. In this process of ‘levelling’, elements of pronunciation that were especially associated with a particular dialect were eliminated. I argue that the Australian accent was established by the early 1830s.

Once the accent was established, the way was open for Australian English to generate its significant vocabulary items, and this occurred to a large measure in the period 1850 to 1900. The gold rushes of the 1850s massively increased Australia's population, and transformed the nature of Australian society. The language of the gold rushes is explored in chapter 6 'Gold, Gold, Gold!' British dialects became a significant quarry for new words in Australian English, and in the quarrying process words that were marginal in British dialects became mainstream in Australia: these words are examined in chapter 7 'The Dialect Evidence'. The expectation might be that these dialect words would have been borrowed soon after settlement, when such words were uttered by dialect speakers, but the fact that this did not occur enforces the argument that in the early period items marked as clearly dialectal were not likely to be taken up in the newly developing language—since this was the time in the creation of the accent that obvious dialect features were being eliminated. Numerous other words were created in Australia after the main gold-rush period of the 1850s, and these are examined in chapter 8 'The Great Expansion'.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there is a growing awareness that there is such a thing as 'Australian English'. It is recorded in dictionaries, it is widely used by Australian writers, and it is vigorously discussed in newspapers and publications such as the *Bulletin*. At the same time, there emerges the beginning of a negative reaction against Australian English. The first target is the Australian accent. Up until the 1880s there were few negative comments about the Australian accent, and the overwhelming judgment of the nineteenth century is that this Australian accent is 'pure', meaning that it was free of any dialectal elements. In chapter 9 'Accent and Empire', I argue that in the late nineteenth century there was a change in the *perception* of the Australian accent, as a result of the creation in England of an ideal standard of pronunciation that came to be called Received Pronunciation (RP). When it was discerned that Australian vowels and diphthongs diverged from this newly created English standard, the Australian accent began to receive judgmental criticism. Until this point there had only been one Australian accent. The new English standard encouraged some Australian speakers (especially with the further encouragement of a new breed of teachers of elocution) to modify their accent towards the English standard. The result of this modification was the manner of speaking that later linguists would call *Cultivated Australian*.

The acceptance of the English standard of pronunciation was part of a wider embrace of the ideals of Empire. In spite of some political independence with Federation in 1901, and in spite of the nationalism that characterised writers

and other artists of the 1890s, Australian nationalistic ideals became merged with notions of Empire in the new century. Such ideals are often designated *myths* in historical discussions, although the sense of myth in this designation is quite removed from ‘myth’ in the sense of ‘a story involving supernatural beings or events’ or ‘a fictitious or imaginary thing’. It is closer in sense to the technical term *mythos* ‘an ideology, a set of beliefs’. In chapter 10 ‘Currency and Sterling’ I argue that in the first half of the twentieth century the myth of Empire and the myth of Nationalism are not necessarily in conflict, but often march side by side. In the official public domain, Australian English (and therefore what it represents) continued to be attacked, and attacks on the vocabulary (fundamentally class based) were added to the attacks on the accent. Yet there was a very strong popular tradition, especially exemplified during the First and Second World Wars, that celebrated Australian English, and saw it as a central marker of identity. Australian vocabulary continued to be generated in great numbers, even if this language would be officially condemned as ‘slang’. It was from this popular milieu, as if in deliberate conflict with and reaction against Cultivated Australian, that what later linguists would call *Broad Australian* emerged—a form of Australian English at an extreme remove from ‘correct’ English pronunciation. Cultivated Australian and Broad Australian came to symbolise the two pervading myths in Australian society—Empire and Nationalism; the British Empire and Australian Nationalism. The vast bulk of Australians spoke what later linguists would call *General Australian* and, in speech and attitudes, these Australians straddled a cultural space that embraced both myths. The tension between the two myths is a long-standing one, often expressed linguistically, and it goes back to the early days of the colony, as discussed in chapter 4 ‘Currency Versus Sterling’.

The final stage in the development of the Australian language was the discarding of the external English standard of language, as exemplified by Received Pronunciation and the class-based judgment of vocabulary, and the embracing of the Australian accent and vocabulary as standards in their own right. In chapter 11 ‘It’s Time’, I argue that the crucial period in this shift is 1966 to 1988. Britain’s moves to join the Common Market in the early 1960s signalled the fact that a break between Australia and Britain was inevitable. There was a renewed interest in Australian English that went hand in hand, as it had in the 1890s, with cultural nationalism. From the mid 1970s Australian dictionaries were produced, and the climax of this lexicographical work was the publication of the *Australian National Dictionary* in 1988, a dictionary that does for Australian English what the 20-volume *Oxford English Dictionary* does



for international English. Complaints about the Australian accent dissipated, and in 1987 a government report was able to declare that ‘Australian English is a dynamic but vital expression of the distinctiveness of Australian culture and an element of national identity’.<sup>3</sup> With the ‘naturalisation’ of the General form of Australian English, the two extremes, Cultivated Australian and Broad Australian, have been in rapid retreat. Of course these extremes can still be heard, especially in some older speakers, but they are hardly known to younger speakers. Australians now largely speak with the one accent, as they had done in the nineteenth century.

This is not to say that there is only one Australian English. In chapter 12 ‘Regional Australian English’ I examine the issue of regionalism in Australian English, and show that it exists more at the level of vocabulary than of accent; I conclude that while there are some regionalisms, they amount to nothing like ‘dialects’. Chapter 13 ‘Other Englishes’ examines some dialects that have emerged, including Aboriginal Englishes and ethnic dialects. The fact that these dialects have been allowed to emerge is a measure of the maturity of Australian English. It is now so confident in its role in Australian society that it can allow for internal diversification.<sup>4</sup> In chapter 14 ‘Postscript: The Future’ I look at what may lie ahead for Australian English, especially in the context of the development of Global English.

In the creation of a new dialect, the divergences from the original language can take place at the levels of accent, vocabulary, and grammar and syntax. This book will show that the Australian accent is the most significant aspect of Australian English, especially when it comes to marking identity. The accent was established before the main process of identity-defining word creation took place, but word creation has been strong since the 1850s, and continues into the twenty-first century. The Australian vocabulary remains distinctive:

To commemorate Australia Day, Top Taste Lamingtons surveyed more than 300 men and women in Britain and the United States to see how well they understood Australian slang. The answer? Not so much. Among the more bizarre misconceptions—41 per cent of British respondents thought a Hills Hoist was a bra while 38 per cent of US respondents reckoned it was a type of rock-climbing apparatus...And 40 per cent of British respondents and 33 per cent of US respondents thought ‘budgie smugglers’ were drug traffickers.<sup>5</sup>

The numerous books on Australian slang focus on many of the more colourful elements of the Australian vocabulary, as represented by *budgie smugglers*, the latest term for the male Speedo-like swimming costume, in the above passage.

Most of these books would include such inventive idioms as: *happy as a bastard on Father's Day*; *all prick and ribs like a drover's dog*; *as dry as a dead dingo's donger*; *as dry as a pommy's towel*; *offlike a bucket of prawns*; *offlike a bride's nightie*; *couldn't train a choko vine over a country dunny*; *flash as a rat with a gold tooth*; *don't come the raw prawn with me*; *miserable as a bandicoot*; *like a shag on a rock*; *like a stunned mullet*. Colourful idioms of this kind, however, make up only a small fraction of the vocabulary of Australian English. Many other terms are more complex, even in their seeming ordinariness. The *Hills hoist* of the above survey can be defined in its prosaic and ubiquitous literal sense as a 'clothes hoist'. This of course captures nothing of its iconic status in Australian society, encapsulated in its appearance in the closing ceremony of the Sydney Olympics, and in the prominence given to it in one of the exhibitions at the National Museum of Australia. It is an integral part of the *great Australian dream*—the ownership of the *quarter-acre block* with a large backyard and ample room for the Hills hoist, the pergola, and the barbecue.

*Speaking our Language* grows out of the research of the Australian National Dictionary Centre at the Australian National University. The Centre is named after the *Australian National Dictionary*, which was first published in 1988, and which includes some 10,000 Australian words and meanings. Since 1988, the Australian National Dictionary Centre has continued its research into the history of Australian words. We are now finalising the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*, and expect to add about 4500 new words and meanings. The present book cannot deal with all of the more than 14,000 words that make up the history of the Australian vocabulary, but it will deal with many of those words that make Australian English different from all other Englishes, and with many of those words that have been important in shaping the Australia of the present and the past.

The emphasis in this book is on accent and vocabulary, since the divergences in the areas of grammar and syntax are marginal. Collins and Peters have recently summarised the research in these latter areas, but the pickings are somewhat thin.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes Australian English varies from British English in grammar by preferring or allowing an American form—for example, the use of *like* as a conjunction is allowed, where British English still demands *as* in formal contexts ('should we say *cantaloupe* for *rockmelon* like they do in Victoria?' or 'should we say *cantaloupe* for *rockmelon* as they do in Victoria?')—but such examples do not add up to anything distinctive in Australian grammar and syntax. On the other hand, some aspects of word formation, such as the addition of *-ie* or *-o* to abbreviated forms, are distinctive, and are discussed in chapter 10.

This book is geared to people with a keen interest in the Australian language, to people who would like to know what the distinguishing features of Australian English are; most importantly it is geared to people who want to know where Australian English came from, what the forces were that moulded it, why it takes its present form, and where it is going.

Since this book is aimed at the general reader, it does not use specialised linguistic terminology. For example, it does not use phonetic symbols for Australian sounds, but makes the nature of those sounds accessible to the general reader by a descriptive process. For readers who would like some guidance about the way the Australian accent varies from standard English, guidelines are provided on pages xvii to xix.

There is no separate bibliography. The Australian National Dictionary Centre provides a very comprehensive and regularly updated bibliography of Australian English at <http://www.anu.edu.au/andc/res/bibliography/index.php>. In addition to sections devoted to general books and general articles, this bibliography is also thematically organised, with sections on the following: dictionaries, accent, colloquialisms and slang, regional Australian English, occupations and special groups, Aboriginal words in English, Aboriginal English, migrants, grammar and syntax. In the text the abbreviation *AND* is used for the *Australian National Dictionary*, and the abbreviation *OED* is used for the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

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# Some Features of Australian Speech

In the discussion that follows, and elsewhere in this book, I shall refer to Received Pronunciation (RP). This is the form of spoken English based on educated speech in southern England, and in the past often referred to as 'BBC English'. It gives a system of 'standard' sounds, against which the sounds of English in other parts of the world can be described. The points below are not meant to be comprehensive in explaining how Australian English differs from RP, but they cover the main general points.

## VOWELS AND DIPHTHONGS

1. **Vowels.** All the Australian sounds differ from RP, but the most commonly noted are:
  - a) The front vowels heard in the pronunciation of the sounds of HID, HEAD, and HAD are raised in Australian English relative to RP. This means that the Australian sound in HID is closer to the sound in RP HEED, HEAD is closer to RP HID, and HAD is closer to RP HEAD.
  - b) The back vowels heard in the pronunciation of the sounds in HARD and HUD are fronted in Australian English relative to RP. This means that they are closer to the sound in RP HAD.
2. **Diphthongs.** All the Australian sounds differ from RP, but the most commonly noted are:
  - a) The sound in Australian MATE is the one most often commented on by non-Australians. Compared with RP, the diphthong heard in Australian MATE has shifted so that it is much closer to RP MITE. This leads to the perception that Australians say RICE rather than RACE, DIE rather than DAY.
  - b) Compared with RP, the diphthong heard in Australian BUY has shifted so that it is closer to RP BOY. This leads to the perception that Australians say

MOY rather than MY, HOYD rather than HIDE.

- c) In RP, the diphthong heard in COW has a back vowel as its starting point, whereas in Australian English the starting point is a front sound, closer to the sound in HAD.

## OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SOUND OF AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH

- 1. Nasality.** It is often argued that compared with RP and many other Englishes Australian speech is very nasal. A.G. Mitchell argues that the percentage of Australians with a degree of nasality in their speech is 3 or 4 per cent. He predicts that much the same percentage would be found in other Englishes: ‘The repeated statement that Australian speech is nasal by comparison with other forms of English is unsupported, meaningless, and almost certainly wrong’.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, nasality is a feature that many have associated with Australian speech.
- 2. Flatness.** It is often argued that compared with RP Australian speech is flat, and at its extreme, characterised by a drawl. There is certainly some truth in the notion that compared with RP and many other Englishes there are fewer variations in intonation in Australian speech—there is less range between highest and lowest pitches. The perception that Australians speak with a drawl may also be the result of the fact that stress tends to be placed more evenly throughout a sentence. Mitchell gives the example of the sentence *thank you very much*: where an RP speaker would stress *thank* and *much*, an Australian speaker would also add a stress or semi-stress to *very*—resulting in the perception of flatness in the pronunciation of the sentence.
- 3. Elision of syllables.** In 1965 there appeared the small book on Strine (Australian pronunciation) entitled *Let Stalk Strine* (i.e. ‘Let’s Talk Australian’ in Strine) by Alistair Morrison writing under the pseudonym ‘Afferbeck Lauder’ (‘alphabetical order’ in Strine). This book made fun of Australians’ tendencies to assimilate consonants, alter word boundaries, and even create new words such as *Gloria Soame* (Strine for ‘glorious home’). While it is true that elisions (the omission of sounds or syllables when speaking), assimilations, and weakening of consonants can operate in all Englishes, they are widely regarded as distinctively Australian. The best-known example internationally is the elision of the greeting *good day* into *g’day*, internationalised in the 1986 film *Crocodile Dundee*, where Mick ‘Crocodile’ Dundee greets total strangers in America with it.

**4. High rising tone.** This is a feature of intonation that has received much comment in recent years. It occurs when a high intonation pattern, usually associated with the asking of a question, is used for what is merely a statement or declaration. Its meaning is contentious: 'Some people have said it expresses a speaker's uncertainty, hesitancy, or lack of self-confidence. Others suggest that it indicates a deference to one's listeners, a kind of politeness.'<sup>2</sup> Guy and Vonwiller conclude that High Rising Tone has important 'communicative functions: 'It elicits feedback from one's audience, checks to see if they understand what is being said, and secures their assent for an extended turn at talk for the speaker.'<sup>3</sup> It is therefore a way of saying 'do you understand?' or 'are you with me?' High Rising Tone appears in some other dialects, including dialects in Canada, New Zealand, California, and the south-eastern United States,<sup>4</sup> but it is very noticeable as a feature of Australian English. There is general consensus among researchers that it was not present in the 1960s, and is therefore a recent development.