

Regionalism

People used to think that radio would level regional differences in pronunciation. True, there was a standard for radio announcers based on the speech ideal found in Ohio. In more than half a century not much changing of the varied American accents has taken place, even with the added impetus of television, which is more pervasive. In actual fact, broadcast people still pay lip service to the ideal speech standard, which persists in the face of a general trend away from uniformity. It's possible to distinguish individuals among some of the best-known television news anchormen and women, using not only their voices but also their modified regional accents. However, they do not all appear to be natives of Ohio.

When our son George was studying Mass Communications at VCU in the seventies, he was frequently teased about his decidedly East Texas accent. He did not aspire to be a newscaster or any other kind of announcer; he was interested only in the activity behind the microphone and camera. Nevertheless, he deliberately moderated the nasal and elided sounds that characterize the part of the country where he grew up. He's back in Texas, but in a city where most of the people are not native-born; he belies his native status by speaking an English somewhat removed from Texas, but he doesn't sound like an Ohioan, either.

I sympathized with him when he was at VCU because I had experienced some of the same teasing about my voice and pronunciation from my teaching colleagues, especially because I was teaching foreign-speaking students how to alter their pronunciations to become more American in their speaking. Some of my friends said I was altering their "foreign" accent by substituting a Texas accent, which was just as foreign. They, of course, were teaching a Virginia accent, a California accent, or the accent of whatever region they came from. I've not been as successful as George, perhaps, but at least I could model a more neutral set of speech sounds for my Asians, Africans, and Europeans. I had two students, one from France and one from Switzerland, who came to VCU to acquire an American accent. They claimed that the people they would be dealing with in France and Switzerland preferred an American accent to a British one. Perhaps a mid-American accent would serve!

When I was a child, I decided that the Texas way of saying *can't* did not make a pretty sound. I deliberately set about eliminating *cain't* from my vocabulary, substituting a flat *can't* as the preferred sound. Even after sixty years of saying *can't*, I still hear myself coming out with a decided *cain't* when I'm under any stress. I learned from living in other parts of the country that Texas does not hold exclusive rights to *cain't*, but I still think it is an unlovely sound, especially when combined with other nasal Texas sounds. I considered Lady Bird Johnson an admirable First Lady, but I deplored her East Texas twang. I have eliminated some of that twang from my pronunciation, but I still have more remnants of my native East Texian than I think I should have, despite the accusation I hear in Dallas of talking like a Virginian! I envy George's ability to mimic other people's

speech, for his talent for mimicry has made it easy for him to adapt the mimicked sounds as his usual speech, thus altering his Texanese.

Occasionally, I have been impressed with other differences between my speech and that of the people around me. When we lived in Portland, Oregon, during World War II, I proved to be a source of much amusement to the shopkeepers in the little grocery store where I did most of my shopping, especially when I took my precious rationing coupons to the meat counter. The butcher usually beckoned to his cronies in the store before he tried to maneuver me into ordering a "half a pound of ground round." He probably could have charged admission because the Oregonians thought my order was a real hoot. I would try to practice the Pacific Northwest way of changing those *ou*'s to *aw*'s or some such, but I never was successful. In Richmond I have tried to use the Tidewater *ou* which is quite different from the Portland *ou*. Here, I have even less success, mainly I think because the Tidewater *ou* depends upon the word in which it occurs.

I am sometimes self-conscious about my Texas *ant* to designate my father's sister, and most of the time I remember to say *ahnt*. The difference was vividly brought to my attention when I first started teaching at J. Sargeant Reynolds. One man became indignant when another one mentioned his *ant* Jane, saying that it was not proper to call a female relative an insect. The discussion became so heated that I had to ask a security guard who was taking the class to sit between the two combatants. About that time our younger son came home from school greatly amused at a classmate's telling Roland that his family was going to *Stanton* to visit his *ahnt*. From this incident Roland learned two Virginia pronunciations in one lesson. An interesting fact is that some friends from Dublin use my version of *ant* so that no one will suspect them of British sentiments.

A kind of footnote to a discussion of regional accents can be found in place names. In Texas we say *Dallis* for Dallas, *Texis* for Texas, *Muh-hay-ah* for Mexia, *Na-ka-doe-ches* for Nacogdoches, and *Bear* for Behar. We can trade off those towns for these Richmond names: *Param* for Parham and *Po-white* for Powhite (as in Powhatan), not to mention *Fo-kir* for Fauquier. I would hate to see us lose all of our distinctive regional pronunciations. One of our Georgia friends was unwittingly a great source of entertainment to people in one office at the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, where his coffee breaks were crowded with Michiganders who were intrigued with his Georgia drawl. I think the United States would be much less interesting if it did not have distinctive regional accents.