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Elocution, editorials, and Englishness: The role of print media in shaping accent attitudes in the long nineteenth century

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the historical policing of pronunciation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, with particular attention to regional variation and its entanglement with class, authority, and linguistic legitimacy. It begins by contextualizing how regional accents were socially charged, often eliciting responses of ridicule or exclusion. The analysis then turns to early prescriptive works by orthoepists such as Thomas Sheridan (1762 and 1780), William Kenrick (1783), and John Walker (1791), who helped construct a linguistic hierarchy in which ‘proper’ pronunciation was aligned with moral and social superiority. Building on these foundations, nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals extended prescriptive ideologies to a wider public, naturalising linguistic norms through humour, commentary, and complaint. Drawing on a corpus of editorials, advertisements, and letters to the editor from sources including *The Times*, *The Morning Chronicle*, and others, the article highlights how the press functioned as both a conduit and creator of metadiscourses on speech. These texts reveal that standard language ideologies were not solely imposed from above, but were also taken up, reproduced, and contested by the reading public. In examining how pronunciation became a symbolic site for the performance of class identity and cultural legitimacy, the article underscores the long-standing role of accent in structuring social inclusion and exclusion.

Keywords: Standard language ideology, pronunciation and social class, print media and language norms, regional accents and exclusion, elocution and linguistic authority, nineteenth-century British press.

1. Standard language debate: Social hierarchy and linguistic prestige

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, regional accents and dialects were not simply markers of geography; they also functioned as powerful indicators of class, education, and social legitimacy. Across a range of texts

from newspapers and periodicals, we will see how the ‘provincial’ speaker was treated with suspicion, amusement, or condescension. Whether in humorous anecdotes, or job advertisements, regional speech was consistently used to position speakers as outsiders to polite society. These portrayals offer insight into the linguistic prejudices of the time and the social boundaries enforced through language.

This article builds on my earlier research (Sturiale 2018), in which I examined how newspapers participated in constructing language ideologies in the nineteenth century. While some materials and conclusions from that earlier study are revisited here, the present article significantly extends the analysis both in chronological range and interpretive depth. It offers a more comprehensive account of the press’s role in circulating, contesting, and stabilising standard language ideologies, drawing on a broader and more systematically curated corpus. This expanded scope makes it possible to explore both continuities and shifts in accent attitudes over the long nineteenth century, and to respond more directly to the need, identified by scholars such as Görlach (1999), for historically grounded data on lay attitudes toward linguistic correctness and prestige.

In eighteenth-century Britain, the emergence of a standardised English pronunciation – often associated with the educated elite of London – led to the marginalization of regional speech patterns (Beal 2010, 2014).

Phrases like “provincial pronunciation” and “vulgar pronunciation” were frequently used in a derogatory manner to describe accents and dialects that deviated from this emerging norm, often associated with the educated elite of London. Orthoepists such as Thomas Sheridan, in his *Lectures on Elocution* (1762) and his dictionary (1781), and John Walker, in his *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791), emphasized the importance of ‘correct’ pronunciation, associating it with social refinement and educational attainment. For example, in his *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791), John Walker labelled certain pronunciations as “vulgar”, reflecting a broader societal tendency to associate non-standard speech with lower social status. These critical terms – such as “vulgar” (94 occurrences), “corrupt” (90), “improper” (54), and “gross” (33) – reveal a strong prescriptive stance toward language use. As visualised in Trapateau’s (2016: 27) analysis, Walker’s most frequent evaluative terms overwhelmingly emphasise deviation from a perceived norm rather than merely describing regional variation. Importantly, such descriptors were not limited to rural or regional accents but extended to any speech forms that did not align with the prescribed “polite” (43 occurrences) or “correct” (77 occurrences) standard, suggesting that linguistic judgment was intricately tied to social and moral hierarchies of the period.

Thomas Sheridan, for example, in his works, often contrasted the “refined” speech of the capital with the “corrupt” pronunciations found in the provinces, suggesting that provincial speech lacked the elegance and propriety of the standard form (Beal 2010).

These attitudes contributed to a linguistic hierarchy that marginalised regional dialects and accents, branding them as inferior or uneducated. The push for a standardised pronunciation was not merely about linguistic uniformity but also about reinforcing social stratifications and cultural dominance (Mugglestone 2003; Beal 2012).

The educated elite in London were not merely speaking differently; they were, through their accent, performing legitimacy, taste, and authority. Meanwhile, speakers from northern England, Scotland, or rural areas were subtly but firmly excluded from the imagined linguistic community of the ‘polite’. By stigmatising regional accents as corrupted or careless, eighteenth-century standardisation efforts reinforced a rigid social hierarchy in which speech functioned as both symptom and symbol of one’s place within the social order. Thus, pronunciation became a site where the anxieties of a rapidly changing class structure were encoded, negotiated, and enforced.

2. From the dictionary to the newspaper: Corpus, method, and historical frame

The present study draws on a qualitative corpus of digitised British newspapers spanning the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. The primary sources were retrieved from the *19th Century British Library Newspapers*, *The Times Digital Archive (1785-2019)*, and *Newspapers.com*. Search terms included “pronunciation”, “vulgar pronunciation”, “provincial pronunciation”, “accent”, “provincial accent”, and “standard English”, among others. These were selected to capture explicit metalinguistic commentary and public discourse surrounding accent, propriety, and social identity.

The resulting dataset includes over 250 newspaper articles, letters to the editor, and advertisements. From this broader collection, I selected approximately 40 texts for close qualitative analysis using two primary criteria: (1) the presence of overt evaluative language about pronunciation or accent (e.g. “vulgar”, “refined”, “correct”); and (2) the extent to which the text reflected or reproduced broader ideological stances concerning class, education, or national belonging through phonetic judgments. This

sampling was guided by an inductive, interpretive approach informed by discourse-historical and metapragmatic frameworks (cf. Agha 2007; Paulsen 2022a, 2022b). The aim was not statistical representativeness, but what might be termed ‘ideological density’ – the selection of texts that foreground accent as a site of normative struggle or symbolic conflict.

This study shares certain methodological affinities with Paulsen’s (2022a, 2022b) work on the enregisterment of American English in nineteenth-century U.S. newspapers, particularly in its attention to newspapers as key vehicles of metadiscursive activity. However, whereas Paulsen focuses on processes of enregisterment over time in a relatively well-defined discursive formation (i.e. “American English”), my approach foregrounds the ideological work of the British press in shaping social meanings attached to pronunciation across a longer and more thematically varied period. Rather than tracing the emergence of a single variety, I analyse how diverse phonetic features – especially those perceived as ‘provincial’ – were publicly evaluated, policed, and contested as part of broader struggles over class, education, and legitimacy. This more fragmented and socially textured approach aims to highlight the multiplicity of accent ideologies circulating in Britain across the long nineteenth century.

What had started as a debate between orthoepists and elocutionists, by the end of the eighteenth century had gone outside the scholarly confines and started to mark ‘a social discourse’ which justified and asked for prescriptive rules. It seems that eighteenth and nineteenth-century newspapers offered the discourse community of orthoepists the opportunity, in Richard Watt’s words (1999: 43), “to become ‘visible’ through the course of time” and, as a consequence, the community of readers could become “conscious of sharing their discourse practices”. As I have discussed elsewhere (Sturiale 2014), key terms associated with the standard language debate – such as “provincial pronunciation”, “vulgar pronunciation”, and “vicious pronunciation” – not only took on new connotative meanings, but also played a role in reinforcing a broader social divide. This divide reflected the aspirations of the emerging middle class, who – importantly – comprised the primary audience and consumer base for pronouncing dictionaries and usage manuals. This dynamic – where linguistic prescription reinforced social hierarchies – was not confined to abstract theory. It was often expressed in strikingly blunt terms by key figures involved in the standardisation process. A revealing example appears in Kenrick’s *A New Dictionary of the English Language* (1783), where he dismisses with scorn the idea that speakers from the linguistic peripheries might shape or teach standards of ‘proper’ English. He writes:

- (1) There seems indeed a most ridiculous absurdity in the pretensions of a native of Aberdeen or Tipperary, to teach the natives of London to speak and to read. Various have been nevertheless the modest attempts of the Scots and Irish, to establish a standard of English pronunciation. That they should not have succeeded is no wonder. Men cannot teach others what they do not themselves know (Kenrick 1783: i).

This passage vividly illustrates how linguistic ideology was bound up with assumptions of geographic and cultural superiority. For Kenrick, linguistic legitimacy is not a matter of education or rhetorical skill but of social origin, and more specifically, of proximity to London. The claim that speakers from Aberdeen or Tipperary are inherently unfit to instruct Londoners betrays a belief that ‘correct’ English is not merely learned, but possessed by birthright. In Kenrick’s formulation, language instruction becomes a function of social authority rather than linguistic competence, and elocution is transformed into a mechanism for exclusion. His remarks encapsulate a wider cultural tendency of the period: to equate standard English with social prestige and to delegitimise regional varieties as inherently flawed or comical deviations. And in this view, Kenrick was by no means alone. The impulse to tie linguistic authority to geographic and social identity is echoed in Samuel Johnson’s famously dismissive remark about Thomas Sheridan: “What entitles Sheridan to fix the pronunciation of English? He has in the first place the disadvantage of being an Irishman” (Boswell 1934: ii, 161). Here, Johnson reduces Sheridan’s credibility as an orthoepist not on the basis of his scholarship or pedagogical skill, but purely on his national origin. Much like Kenrick, Johnson implies that being born outside England – and more pointedly, outside of London – constitutes an inherent linguistic deficiency. This comment underscores the extent to which the project of standardising English pronunciation was entangled with cultural prejudice and assumptions of English (specifically metropolitan) superiority. Sheridan, despite his contributions to elocution and rhetorical training, is symbolically disqualified by Johnson not because of what he says, but because of *who* he is. This reinforces the idea that the construction of a linguistic standard was as much about policing identity as it was about defining correct usage.

To illustrate the extent to which scholarly prejudices had entered public discourse, two striking letters to the editor underscore the mockery directed at non-English orthoepists and the persistence of ethnolinguistic hierarchies in the public imagination. A particularly scathing piece from the

Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser (14 December 1786) derides Irish involvement in pronunciation reform by comparing it to pigs performing rational acts:

- (2) [...] in an age like this, when attempts of a much more arduous nature are every day presented to our notice: when pigs are brought to exercise all the functions of rationality; and Hibernians profess to teach the true pronunciation of the English tongue. (*Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, London, 14 December 1786)

The analogy is not merely dismissive; it is profoundly dehumanising, as it suggests that Irish speaker's contributions to English phonology are both absurd and illegitimate. More than fifty years later, a letter to the editor published in *The Age* (22 August 1841) echoes this logic through a similarly sardonic observation:

- (3) English Pronouncing Dictionary. It is a curious fact that there is no English Pronouncing Dictionary compiled by an English-man. Stephen Jones was a Welshman, Sheridan was an Irishman, and Walker was a Scotchman [sic.]. (*The Age*, London 22 August 1841)

Here again, national origin is treated not as incidental but as disqualifying. These excerpts demonstrate how deeply embedded linguistic nationalism had become by the early nineteenth century. They also reveal that even as Irish, Scottish, and Welsh orthoepists were instrumental in shaping the very standards of English pronunciation, they continued to be framed as outsiders to the language they helped codify.

3. The power of the press in nineteenth-century language ideology

By the nineteenth century, newspapers and periodicals had become central agents in shaping public opinion, influencing not only political and cultural matters but also linguistic ones. As scholars like Mugglestone (2003) and Agha (2003) have observed, the press played a pivotal role in circulating and reinforcing standard language ideology, helping to define what was considered "correct" or "proper" English. This influence extended beyond grammar and vocabulary to include pronunciation, making the way English sounded an integral part of the broader ideological project.

Importantly, these publications did not merely reflect linguistic norms; they played an active role in constructing them. Through editorials, advice columns, letters to the editor, and satirical commentary, the press contributed to the development of a metalanguage surrounding accent and correctness, establishing frameworks for discussing and evaluating speech. These frameworks became accessible to an increasingly literate public, enabling readers to internalise, reproduce, and enforce linguistic norms. Moreover, newspapers were instrumental in propagating simplified and ideologically charged beliefs about language. These beliefs often reflected social hierarchies rather than linguistic realities (see Sturiale 2016, 2018).

In connection with this, Agha (2007) argues that the press expanded the circulation of accent metadiscourses into new domains, especially among middle-class readers. These publications not only reached wide audiences but also provided them with tools to evaluate, categorise, and moralise about speech. In doing so, they helped consolidate metapragmatic stereotypes that linked accents to assumptions about intelligence, respectability, or trustworthiness.

In sum, the nineteenth-century press did not simply report language change. It shaped the terms by which language was socially understood and judged. It helped naturalise the idea that certain accents were not just different, but better, more authoritative, and more 'English'. In this way, newspapers and magazines became powerful agents of linguistic socialisation, supporting the broader cultural work carried out by elocution manuals, dictionaries, and formal education.

To fully understand the ideological work carried out by the press in the nineteenth century, however, it is essential to return to its intellectual and cultural roots in the eighteenth century. The press did not invent the notion of 'correct' pronunciation, nor did it originate the belief that speech could and should reflect one's social position. Rather, it inherited and amplified a standardising agenda that had been formalised decades earlier by lexicographers, grammarians, and orthoepists. As rightly observed by Beal:

The second half of the eighteenth century was, indeed, the period when the standardisation of English pronunciation reached the codification stage, as variants became prescribed or proscribed and clear guidelines for the attainment of 'correct' pronunciation appeared in the form of pronouncing dictionaries (Beal 2010: 36).

While eighteenth-century dictionaries codified standard forms of pronunciation, it was the press in the nineteenth century that played a key role

in disseminating, entrenching, and negotiating their social meaning. Newspapers acted as a bridge between scholarly codification and popular uptake, translating abstract linguistic norms into concrete social expectations.

In developing this argument, my paper also responds to a gap identified by Görlach (1999), who noted the scarcity of reliable data on historical attitudes toward linguistic correctness and prestige. He wrote:

There is an insufficiency of reliable data on what people thought about linguistic correctness and prestige (and how such opinions related to the same person's actual usage); anecdotal evidence comes from private letters and similar documents and from the prescriptive statements in grammar books and advice in books on etiquette. Attitudes can also be reconstructed from novels and plays, although these data need to be interpreted with particular caution. The authors' main objective, then as now, is unlikely to be the provision of a realistic account; rather, they tend to employ selected sociolinguistic features to characterize their protagonists in conversation or to make them comment on others' speech forms (Görlach 1999: 26).

Görlach (1999: 26) notes that much of what we know about historical language attitudes derives from anecdotal sources such as private correspondence, literary texts, etiquette manuals, and prescriptive grammars. However, he does not account for the role of newspapers and letters to the editor – forms of public discourse that are central to the present study. As outlined above, the corpus analysed here draws on digitised archives including the *19th Century British Library Newspapers*, *The Times Digital Archive (1785-2019)*, and *Newspapers.com*. These materials demonstrate that the press not only reflected pronunciation norms but actively participated in shaping them, capturing both the instability of spoken language and the enduring influence of normative traditions. In this way, newspapers emerged not just as observers of linguistic change, but as powerful regulators of linguistic legitimacy in nineteenth-century Britain.

4. The eighteenth-century legacy: “Remove defective enunciation”

The ideological foundation for nineteenth-century language standardisation was laid in the eighteenth century through educational reforms and prescriptive publications that aimed to shape not only how English was written, but also how it was spoken. A telling example appears in an advertisement published

in *The Times* on 22 August 1800 (and reprinted on 26 September) for Charles Allen's *Orthographical Exercises*. The text promotes reading aloud as a means "to correct broad, vulgar, and provincial accent in youth", adding that such exercises would "remove defective enunciation, and serve, at the same time, as spelling exercises". This explicit objective, which focused on eliminating perceived linguistic faults through pronunciation training, reveals that pronunciation was regarded not simply as a technical matter but as a marker of moral and intellectual refinement. The association between "correct" speech and social respectability reinforced long-standing hierarchies of accent and class. Texts like Allen's helped to establish a prescriptive metalanguage that was later taken up and amplified by nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines, embedding linguistic authority within broader cultural narratives of propriety, education, and national identity.

This legacy of regulating pronunciation continued in the press, where certain phonetic features came to be closely associated with vulgarity, ignorance, or social inferiority. A particularly vivid example appears in an article from *The Blackburn Standard* (18 October 1837), which outlines the perceived features of "vulgar pronunciation" through satire and phonetic mimicry:

- (4) Vulgar pronunciation. – One of the peculiarities of vulgar English pronunciation is to put the letter *r* at the end of words ending with a vowel. Some of the inhabitants of London, if they had to speak the following sentence, A fellow broke the window, and hit Isabella on the elbow, as she was playing a suonata on the piano, – would give it in the following manner – A fellor broke the windor, and hit Isabellor on the elbor, as she was playing a sonatar on the pianor. Others adopt the contrary plan, and leave out the *r* as often as they can. There are magistrates of high pretensions to education, who would say, "The conduct of the prisona' and his general characta' render it propa' that he should no longa' be a memba' of this community." Equally glaring is the taking away of *h* from places where it is required, and giving it where its absence is desirable. The termination of words ending in *ing* with a *k*, as *somethink*, is not less incorrect or less disagreeable. (*The Blackburn Standard*, 18 October, 1837)¹

This passage offers a vivid example of how nineteenth-century print media engaged in explicit linguistic prescriptivism and social stereotyping

¹ The very same article appeared in *The Cornwall Royal Gazette*, 3 November 1837.

through mockery of nonstandard speech. The article targets two opposing tendencies – intrusive /r/ (as in *windor*, *Isabellor*) and non-rhoticity (as in *characta'*, *memba'*) – and condemns *h*-dropping and the substitution of the velar nasal /ŋ/ with a plosive /k/, as in *somethink*. These features are presented as clear signs of vulgarity and social inferiority.

Through humorous exaggeration and overt correction, the text constructs a binary opposition between “correct” and “incorrect” speech, implicitly linking pronunciation with education, propriety, and social worth. This reflects a broader pattern in which newspapers functioned as agents of language standardisation, promoting a narrow model of phonetic “correctness” while stigmatising variation. As Mugglestone (2003: 38) aptly puts it, such commentary targets “localized phonetic markers unacceptable within ideologies of ‘phonetic propriety’”, thereby contributing to the social marginalisation of nonstandard voices.

A further illustration of how pronunciation was used as a site of social distinction appears in a short anecdote reprinted in *The Times* on 4 January 1837, originally published in the *Kilkenny Journal*. It recounts the linguistic misadventure of a rural speaker entering an urban setting:

- (5) A few days since a simple country girl entered a haberdasher’s shop in this city, and, proceeding to the counter, asked, with the broad and vulgar pronunciation of the district to which she belonged – “Would you, thin, Miss, have anything that would shoot a young parson?” The fair shopkeeper, thus interrogated, looked exceedingly puzzled; she thought, at first, that the country lass had mistaken the establishment for a gunmaker’s shop, and uttered an exclamation of wonder at the question. However, an explanation was speedily obtained, when it appeared that the “rural fair” meant to ask for some article that would suit a young person. – *Kilkenny Journal* (*Kilkenny Journal*, reprinted in *The Times*, 4 January 1837).

Though humorous in tone, this anecdote is revealing in its treatment of rural dialects. The joke hinges entirely on phonetic confusion, exploiting the girl’s “broad and vulgar pronunciation” for comic effect. What is presented as a harmless misunderstanding in fact reinforces social and linguistic hierarchies. The term “vulgar” is not used descriptively but evaluatively, casting the girl’s rural speech as socially inferior. Her accent marks her as unsophisticated, and the amusement comes at her expense.

Such anecdotes were common in nineteenth-century newspapers, particularly in urban publications, where they served to entertain middle-

class readers while affirming their linguistic and cultural superiority. In this way, dialect and accent functioned not only as regional markers but as signs of education, class, and social legitimacy. This piece illustrates how language could easily become a vehicle for social exclusion, with humour operating as a means of reinforcing dominant norms and marginalising nonstandard voices.

Alongside anecdotal articles, classified advertisements, particularly want ads, also offer striking examples of sociolinguistic relevance. These brief notices reveal how deeply entrenched accent bias could be, even among the educated and aspirational upper-middle classes. The following three examples, taken from *The Times*, illustrate the role of pronunciation in constructing and policing social hierarchies in everyday life.

The first example, published on 18 October 1802, advertises for a private tutor in the family of a “respectable Country Gentleman”:

- (6) PRIVATE TUTOR. – WANTED, in the Family of a respectable Country Gentleman, residing in Ireland, a Person who will undertake the INSTRUCTION of TWO YOUNG BOYS, of gentle and amiable dispositions; and who must be perfectly well acquainted with the Greek and Latin Classics, as the Boys are to be prepared for the University. He will also be required to instruct them in French, Geography, the Use of the Globes, &c. Whoever may be appointed to this situation, will receive a very liberal Salary, and be treated with the utmost respect and attention. It is therefore expected that he shall possess the Manners and Education of a Gentleman, and be free from any Provincial Accent. (*The Times*, 18 October 1802)

This notice reveals how accent served as a final marker of acceptability, even when other indicators of class and education were firmly in place. The tutor is expected to be classically educated, morally respectable, and treated “with the utmost respect”, yet none of this compensates for the potential social risk posed by a provincial accent. This suggests that phonetic conformity operated as a gatekeeping tool, reinforcing elite boundaries and defining who could rightfully embody the role of “gentleman”.

The second advertisement, dated 5 August 1875, further illustrates the exclusionary force of pronunciation norms, this time in the context of home education:

- (7) HOME EDUCATION. – A lady, educating her little girl under a governess, wishes to meet with one or two LITTLE GIRLS to share

her studies. For terms of address K., Wood-green London, N. N.B. No child with a provincial accent can be accepted. (*The Times*, 5 August 1875)

In this case, accent functions as a marker of social contamination, explicitly barring children with non-standard pronunciation from joining what appears to be a domestic and socially exclusive educational arrangement. No explanation is provided for the restriction, which suggests that the undesirability of a provincial accent was assumed to be self-evident. The presence of terms such as “lady” and “governess” clearly situates this notice within an upper-class milieu. What is particularly striking here is that linguistic discrimination is not directed downward toward lower social strata alone; rather, it is applied laterally or even upward, excluding potential peers based solely on their manner of speech. Accent, in this context, becomes a decisive boundary marker that enforces internal hierarchies even within the socially privileged classes.

The third example, from 17 May 1838, presents perhaps the most telling case. It advertises a modest role in a girls’ school, focused primarily on domestic duties such as needlework:

- (8) WANTED, in a small school, a YOUNG PERSON to take charge of the wardrobe, and who must be in every respect a good plain needle worker. Although accomplishments are not required, she must have genteel manners, and speak the English language well and without any provincial accent; she must also be so far educated in other respects as to be able to instruct the pupils in a plain way in the absence of the principal. (*The Times*, 17 May 1838)

Despite the humble nature of the post and the limited educational requirements, the demand for accent conformity remains non-negotiable. This underscores the pervasiveness of accent-based discrimination, which extended well beyond elite professions and into working-class and semi-educated domains. The expectation that even a needleworker speak “without any provincial accent” reveals the aspirational force of standard pronunciation, which functioned as a kind of symbolic capital for those seeking to access or maintain social respectability.

Together, these examples exemplify what Mugglestone (2003: 38) describes as the rejection of “localized phonetic markers unacceptable within ideologies of ‘phonetic propriety’”. They demonstrate how accent was not treated as neutral linguistic variation but as a socially charged index of

refinement, legitimacy, and fitness for inclusion. In each case, pronunciation becomes a tool of social sorting, reinforcing boundaries within and even across the “respectable” classes.

5. Public discourses on phonological change²

In the late nineteenth century, newspapers continued to play a key role in reflecting and reinforcing public attitudes towards pronunciation, particularly in relation to ongoing phonological changes. One revealing example appears in a letter published in *The Times* on 27 December 1890, under the title “Modern English Pronunciation” and signed by “A Country Rector”³:

- (9) [I]n modern English the letter R has become, or is becoming, a silent sign, or at best a kind of half-vowel, in a large class of words in which we of an older generation were taught carefully to sound it. As a fact, the change is observable enough, its cause I am disposed to attribute not to the growth of scientific philology, but to that of pure laziness. (*The Times*, 27 December 1890)

This excerpt provides a striking illustration of how phonological change – specifically, the rise of non-rhoticity – was publicly debated and socially judged. The writer laments the disappearance of post-vocalic /r/, particularly in environments where older speakers had been taught to pronounce it clearly. Notably, the tone is not neutral or merely observational. The shift is not attributed to natural linguistic evolution or academic explanation, but instead dismissed as the product of “pure laziness”.

This moral framing is typical of prescriptive lay discourse, where linguistic changes are interpreted as signs of social or intellectual decline rather than as natural developments. By contrasting modern pronunciation with the “carefully taught” norms of an older generation, the writer positions themselves as a custodian of traditional standards, mourning what they see as a cultural and generational loss. A follow-up passage from the same letter continues the argument by pointing to minimal pairs such as “law” and “lore” or “laud” and “lord”:

² This section draws in part on material previously published in Sturiale (2018).

³ The letter is dated “December 22”.

- (10) Between ‘law’ and ‘lore’, ‘laud’ and ‘lord,’ and the like respectively, there is no difference in sound, and that so say the great doctors and professors at Oxford and elsewhere. (*The Times*, 27 December 1890)

Here, the anxiety is not only aesthetic or moral but also functional. The phonological merger resulting from the loss of /r/ is seen to undermine clarity and distinction between words. Interestingly, the writer invokes academic authorities, not to support the change, but to criticise them for allegedly condoning it. This reveals an underlying skepticism toward linguistic expertise when it appears to validate trends that the public perceives as decline. A similar concern appears in an earlier letter written by Irish phonetician James Leckey and published in *St James’s Gazette*:

- (11) To what extent the consonant *r* has been lost in actual speech is an important question of English philology. [...] Those who, like myself, always pronounce an *r* even in *iron*, can only utter an unavailing protest against this process of decay, which has confounded *father* with *farther*, *stalk* with *stork*, *Leah* with *Lear*, etc. The rising generation are satisfied, no doubt, with their own dialect, and treat our disapproval with indifference. (*St James’s Gazette*, 6 April 1883)⁴

Leckey frames the phenomenon as a “sin of omission”, and like the rector in *The Times*, links it to a broader process of linguistic decay. Though he acknowledges the descriptive work of scholars like Alexander J. Ellis, Leckey ultimately aligns with a prescriptive view, positioning himself as a defender of phonological clarity and tradition. Together, these letters exemplify how phonological shifts such as the loss of rhoticity were not simply described but ideologically charged. These changes became symbolic battlegrounds in broader cultural debates over education, authority, and generational values. Issues of pronunciation extended beyond rhoticity. The so-called “poor letter H” was also a site of controversy and social anxiety. In a letter to *The Times* dated 27 December 1856, a correspondent named Marian remarks:

- (12) I have been taught and teach that the “h” in *humble* is not aspirated and on reference to Walker’s Pronouncing Dictionary [...] I find the word “humble” classed among the words in which the “h” is not to be aspirated. Yet, Sir, I confess that at church I do frequently hear

⁴ The same letter was also published in the American newspaper *Brown County World* on 3 May 1883.

clergymen pronounce the word *humble* with an aspirate, particularly in the phrase 'humble and hearty thanks'. (*The Times*, 27 December 1856)⁵

Here, Marian invokes the authority of John Walker's dictionary, a foundational prescriptive source, to critique the perceived mispronunciation of *humble* by clergy. This example shows that even educated figures such as clergymen or barristers could be targets of public linguistic policing. Another example comes from a letter published on 7 June 1878 in *The Times*, where the pronunciation of *wh*-words was debated:

- (13) Sir, – "W. A. M." is wrong in the instances he adduces of Irishmen misplacing the "h". Let him and others who consider the pronunciation referred to incorrect consult the Dictionaries and amend their own pronunciation.

Webster's note on the subject is as follows: –

"In words beginning with *wh* the letter *h* or aspirate, when both letters are pronounced precedes the sound of *w*. Thus, *what*, *when* are pronounced *hwat*, *hwen*. So they were written by our ancestors, and so they ought to be written still, as they are by the Danes and Swedes." Walker's note (397) is to the same effect; it concludes thus: – "In the pronunciation of all words beginning with *wh* we ought to breathe forcibly before we pronounce the *w*, as if the words were written *hoo-at*, *hoo-ile*, &c., and then we shall avoid that feeble cockney pronunciation which is so disagreeable to a correct ear." Yours, &c., ALEX. COMYNS. (*The Times*, 7 June, 1878)

This letter reveals how debates over phonetic norms were rooted in appeals to historical precedent and dictionary authority, particularly Walker and Webster. The writer, Alex Comyns, insists that the "correct" pronunciation of *wh*-words should preserve the voiceless labiovelar fricative [ɱ], rather than the more common voiced approximant [w], aligning his view with both historical orthography and Scandinavian parallels. His reference to "cockney pronunciation" as "disagreeable to a correct ear" underscores how

⁵ A reader of *The Blackburn Standard*, in defining "vulgar pronunciation," listed several phonological habits to be avoided, including the use "of the letter *r* at the end of words ending with a vowel" and the pronunciation of "the termination of words ending in *-ing* with a *k*." To this, the writer added: "Equally glaring is the taking away of *h* from places where it is required, and giving it where its absence is desirable" (*The Blackburn Standard*, 18 October 1837).

regional variation was stigmatised through a class-based lens. The appeal to linguistic history, combined with overt social judgment, illustrates how phonological conservatism was employed to reinforce hierarchies of taste, education, and propriety. These issues, far from being confined to Britain, also featured in transatlantic discourse, where similar anxieties about pronunciation emerged in comparisons between British and American English. Writing in the *Preston Chronicle* on 15 October 1864, Maurice O'Connor Morris wrote:

- (14) At any rate, if the Americans murder the Queen's English in their own way [...] I am sure we do equally in ours; and certainly the letter 'h' has a 'better time of it' with them than with us: indeed on the whole, I think that, man for man and woman for woman, the Americans speak better English than ourselves; though I believe our highest standard to be above theirs. – *Maurice O'Connor Morris. (Preston Chronicle, 15 October 1864)*

Here, American and British phonetic usage is compared with a hint of self-deprecating humour, acknowledging that while American English is often mocked, British English is equally flawed – particularly in its treatment of /h/.

Finally, a letter published in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on 8 May 1887 criticises English pronunciation of *wh*-words from an American perspective:

- (15) We have had English actors and actresses enough during the present dramatic season to be able to make comparison of English vs. American pronunciation of our common language [...]. En revanche we have incessantly caught the Englishman uttering "wich", "ware", "wy" and "wen", for the American's "which", "where" and "when". (*The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 8 May 1887*)

This comparison adds an international dimension to the discourse, demonstrating that pronunciation was also central to debates about national identity and linguistic authority.

Together, these letters and articles highlight how phonological changes in features such as rhoticity and the pronunciation of *wh*-words were not only debated within scholarly circles but also actively contested in the public sphere. Pronunciation became a focal point in broader ideological conflicts involving tradition, education, authority, and class, with newspapers serving as key platforms for expressing, enforcing, and challenging linguistic norms.

6. Continuities into the twentieth century: Defining and defending ‘proper’ speech

To justify the use of the phrase “the long nineteenth century” in the title of this paper, I want to conclude by drawing attention to two early twentieth-century examples, both of which reflect the enduring legacy of prescriptive ideologies that took root in the late 1700s and would later find institutional form in developments such as the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English.

The first piece, published in *The Times* on 10 August 1923 under the title “Phonetics and Obstinacy”, opens with a striking observation:

- (16) Even standard English, after the phoneticians have fixed it, is subject to ceaseless modification, with which it may be hard for phonetics to keep pace. A single solecism, or oddity, may injure a speaker as much as a hundred; and yet a hundred – such is convention – will not be as dangerous as one. There are provincial accents which are received into polite society, others that are not. The Scottish, for instance, will pass muster where the Devonian or East Anglian will fail. It would be interesting to watch an attempt by phoneticians to bring the Caledonians into line. As in other spheres of persuasion there are apt to be classes which missionaries agree to ignore, so it is, it may be suspected, in the field of speech. When the zealot is faced with no alternative to trying his powers of conversion, as the phrase is, “on the dog,” onlookers may be forgiven if, out of sympathy for that companionable creature, they are mildly amused when the tyke prefers obstinately to take no notice. His indifference, we observe, is not considered very important by Mr. Fisher. (*The Times*, 10 August 1923)

This commentary captures several key themes at the heart of early twentieth-century attitudes toward speech. First, it acknowledges the instability of “standard English”, pointing out that even after being codified by phoneticians, it remains subject to continuous and unpredictable modification. The distinction drawn between Scottish pronunciation, which “passes muster”, and other regional accents like Devonian or East Anglian, which are said to fail, underscores the social arbitrariness of accent prestige. In this context, phonetic correctness becomes less about linguistic clarity and more about social capital.

Particularly telling is the ironic suggestion that phoneticians might try to “bring the Caledonians into line”. This remark highlights the absurdity of attempting to enforce uniform pronunciation across culturally and

regionally distinct communities. The metaphor of the “zealot” attempting to convert a dog, who remains cheerfully indifferent, reinforces the view that language reform often meets with benign resistance and that speakers with strong local identities may simply choose not to conform. The article thus casts doubt on the effectiveness of top-down linguistic prescription while also acknowledging its persistence as a cultural ideal.

By combining social commentary with humour and satire, the piece reflects broader anxieties about class, authority, and the perceived erosion of linguistic standards. It anticipates institutional efforts to define “proper” pronunciation – most notably, the BBC’s later work on Received Pronunciation – while also questioning their legitimacy and impact.

The second article, published in *The Times* (5 March 1924, p. 12), addresses a public disagreement over the pronunciation of the word *isolate*, with one speaker defending *eye-solate* against George Bernard Shaw’s preferred *issolate*. The anonymous dramatic critic writes:

- (17) Just one word more, the last so far as I am concerned, about the pronunciation of “isolate.” Mr. Shaw referred me to the “pronouncing dictionaries.” I went, as was natural to an Englishman when his own use of English was in question, to the one indisputable authority, the Oxford English Dictionary, which confirmed me in pronouncing “isolate” as eye-solate. Mr. Shaw counters, on behalf of “issolate,” with an American, a couple of Scotchmen, and a German. And he adds the weight of his own authority to inform us that “ice-olate is a vulgar pronunciation.” I am afraid I cannot defer to any one of the five. I would repeat what Johnson said to Boswell about the pronouncing dictionary contemplated by Sheridan (“Old Sherry”): “Sir, what entitles Sheridan to fix the pronunciation of English? He has, in the first place, the disadvantage of being an Irishman.” And so, when Mr. Shaw condemns my pronunciation of “isolate” because “the ambiguity” (why “ambiguity”?) “and ugliness of the long ‘i’ make it impossible for any speaker with an intelligent ear,” I think he is forgetting the difference between English and Irish (or American or Scotch or German) ears – a difference which is not altogether without its importance when the ugliness of English vowel-sounds is in question. Be that as it may, the Oxford Dictionary is good enough for me. (*The Times*, 5 March 1924)

This article combines wit and polemic to frame pronunciation not merely as a matter of linguistic preference but as a question of cultural authority.

The writer's appeal to the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the one indisputable authority" draws a firm boundary between legitimate and illegitimate voices in pronunciation debates. Crucially, the quotation of Dr Johnson's remark about Thomas Sheridan ("He has, in the first place, the disadvantage of being an Irishman") echoes a familiar eighteenth-century prejudice already discussed in Section 2. That this jibe resurfaces more than a century later underscores the persistence of ethno-linguistic bias and the long shadow cast by Enlightenment-era orthoepic debates. In this context, pronunciation becomes not just a phonetic concern but a means of affirming national identity, cultural legitimacy, and hierarchical control over the English language.

7. Concluding remarks

Throughout this paper, I have shown how newspapers, alongside their readers, played a central role in identifying, disseminating, and legitimising a normative model of spoken English. Like the eighteenth-century orthoepists and elocutionists, the press contributed to what Agha (2003: 231) describes as the transformation of pronunciation into a "status emblem". Yet this process was not simply top-down. Letters to the editor, in particular, offered a participatory space in which ordinary readers voiced their views, debated authoritative claims, and helped draw the boundaries of acceptability and deviance in speech.

As Lesley Milroy (1999: 173) has noted, debates over standard English are marked by a paradox: both experts and laypeople invest heavily in an idealised norm that is never fully attainable. Far from undermining its authority, this unattainability seems only to intensify its ideological pull. What this paper has aimed to show is that the effort to define and defend "proper" pronunciation was not confined to a specific period. It spanned what we might call a long nineteenth century, a period marked not only by the codification of linguistic norms but also by their ongoing negotiation, enforcement, and contestation in the pages of the press.

This study has argued that pronunciation debates were not merely reflections of linguistic change, but active sites for the construction and contestation of social identity. Accent became a shorthand for broader concerns about class, morality, respectability, and national belonging. Newspapers functioned as mediating agents in this process, amplifying the voices of both institutional authorities and everyday speakers. In doing so, they created a uniquely public forum for linguistic ideology, where the normative power of pronunciation could be reaffirmed, ridiculed,

or resisted. By answering Görlach's (1999) call for more reliable data on historical language attitudes, this paper has also highlighted the value of the press as an archive of linguistic consciousness. Editorials, advertisements, satirical commentary, and reader correspondence together constitute a rich body of evidence through which we can trace not only how English was spoken, but how it was heard, judged, and socially valorised.

This British context also invites comparative reflection. Paulsen's (2022a, 2022b) work on the enregisterment of American English in nineteenth-century U.S. newspapers provides a compelling model for exploring how similar ideological processes unfolded in a different national setting. A transatlantic comparative approach could deepen our understanding of how press discourse shaped – and was shaped by – divergent cultural ideals of language, identity, and authority. Such research would help map the distinctive yet parallel roles that British and American newspapers played in constructing pronunciation as a social emblem.

What emerges from this analysis is a picture of standard pronunciation as a moving target, subject to intense social scrutiny and ideological investment. Its definition depended as much on who was speaking as on how they spoke. Despite its elusiveness – or perhaps precisely because of it – the ideal of 'proper' speech became a powerful mechanism for establishing social distinction. In this way, pronunciation norms helped structure the symbolic boundaries of Englishness itself, shaping who could speak with authority and who, quite literally, remained out of place.

As the twentieth-century examples demonstrate, the ideological framework built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not simply disappear with modernity. On the contrary, it evolved into institutionalised norms that continued to shape public perceptions of linguistic propriety. The long shadow of prescriptive thought reveals the persistence of an older logic: that how one speaks can and should be a marker of who one is.

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