

'Veg-e-ta-ble' or 'veg-ta-ble'? How language wars raged at the BBC in the 1920s as bosses debated if pronunciation was posh enough (and they even argued over how to say 'ski')

- **BBC's Advisory Committee on Spoken English was established in 1926**
- **It gave rules on how certain words must be said in Received Pronunciation**
- **Among the unusual pronunciations they recommended were 'vegetable' with four syllables and 'ski' said as 'shee'**
- **The story of the committee has come to light in a new book**

By [Hugo Gye for MailOnline](#)

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The BBC used to be riven with disagreement over whether presenters were using a sufficiently upper-class accent, a new book has revealed.

In the corporation's early years, bosses set up a unit to rule on how words should be pronounced in the case of disagreement in order to establish the BBC as the national authority on the language.

Some of the words they discussed, such as 'garage' and 'Celtic', remain divisive - but the debate around others, including 'vegetable', 'ski' and 'margarine', might seem more baffling to modern Britons.

The story behind the Advisory Committee on Spoken English, founded in 1926 has been brought to light in a new book by Swiss-based academic Jürg R. Schwyter.

He reveals how the BBC and its first Director General, Lord Reith, were determined to educate the public in how to speak Received Pronunciation, or RP.

However, the corporation sometimes found it difficult to determine exactly what was the 'correct' way to pronounce certain words.

For example, in 1935 one employee asked in a memo whether 'vegetable' should be pronounced with four syllables or - as would be the norm now - with just three, ignoring the second 'e'.

He pointed out that although four syllables was traditional, it was only 'the working class' who still tended to pronounce the word that way.

The committee's assistant secretary replied: 'I am afraid I must side with the lower classes: four syllables, please. Also I don't agree that it is a case of class distinction - I think it's merely one of... slovenly rapid speech by all classes.'

Bizarrely, one of the most controversial words ruled on by the committee was 'ski', which nowadays is without exception pronounced with a hard 'k'.

In the 1920s, officials initially ruled that it should be pronounced 'shee', in imitation of the word's Norwegian pronunciation, but changed their mind twice in just a few years.



The BBC, whose London headquarters are pictured, used to debate on the correct pronunciation of certain words

The decisions of the committee attracted a great deal of attention from the public and from other bodies, Professor Schwyter writes.

BBC listeners would write in to Radio Times to give their own opinions on pronunciation, often complaining that standards were slipping.

One contentious word was 'margarine', which was (as now) pronounced with a soft 'g' by BBC newsreaders.

Food giant Unilever, along with members of the public, argued unsuccessfully that the product should have a hard 'g', because it is derived from margaric acid.

However, Professor Schwyter writes that despite the openness to public comments, 'The BBC still was, in many respects, a frightfully upper-class, public school, and Oxbridge organisation where RP and no small degree of snobbery prevailed.'

Among the many other words which were ruled on by the committee were 'Armada', to be pronounced 'armayda', 'issue' as 'issew' instead of the modern-day 'ishew', and 'Celtic' with a soft 'c', like the football club.

The book chronicles how some words gradually changed their official pronunciation, such as 'garage' which was originally spoken as if it were French and ended up as 'garredge'.

The committee was disbanded in 1939, and the following decades have seen a move away from RP towards a greater diversity of regional accents at the BBC and other broadcasters.

However, even during its heyday some listeners complained that it was too upper-class - one wrote to the BBC that 'slight Scottish accent is greatly appreciated both in Canada and the States', because RP sounded too 'weak'.

Although the BBC still has a Pronunciation Unit, it now advises only on proper nouns such as names and places, with a particular emphasis on foreign words.



Boss: Director General Lord Reith was keen to impose high standards on the public through the BBC's programmes

Dictating to the Mob: The History of the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English, by Jürg R. Schwyter, is [out now](#) through Oxford University Press.

