

Vegetable was a hot potato for the early BBC

Jack Malvern Arts Correspondent

The early years of the BBC in the 1920s and 1930s were a time of pioneering broadcasts, noble values — and heated arguments about the word “vegetable”.

Squabbles and class sensitivities were rife at Broadcasting House, according to a book about the corporation's pronunciation committee that gives details of the anguish over how announcers should say garage, whether margarine should have a hard or soft “g” and the number of syllables in vegetable.

A BBC memo from 1935 asked: “Shall we follow the modern tendency, or shall we go back to four syllables? The question seems to me to be complicated by the fact that I think at present it is more or less a class distinction. The middle and upper classes make the elision, whereas the working class pronounce

all four syllables.” The quandary was resolved by a Miss Simmond, assistant secretary of the advisory committee on spoken English, who declared that she “must side with the lower classes: four syllables please”.

Jurg Schwyter, author of *Dictating to the Mob* and professor of English linguistics at the University of Lausanne, found that the most divisive word was ski, which was the subject of three rulings. The committee, whose members included George Bernard Shaw, first chose “shee” after the Norwegian pronunciation in the late 1920s before changing to the French “ski” in 1930 and back to “shee” again in 1934.

The BBC stood firm over “margarine”, which it recommended should have a soft “g” despite protests from Unilever that it should have a hard “g” because it derived from margoric acid

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and that that version was in general use “among educated speakers”.

Professor Schwyter said that there were eternal squabbles over words such as again (agen or again) and garage. “It seems that by late 1930 ‘garage’ was given its UK passport,” he said, “as the minutes of the committee's tenth meeting record, ‘The committee substituted GARREDGE for their previous recommendation.’ In other words, the loan-word was anglicised.”

The BBC also campaigned to maintain the “purity of the language” and tried to eliminate homophones, so that shaw, shore, sure each sounded different. Evidence suggests that it had to admit defeat.

The committee was suspended in 1939 and the BBC now advises its presenters only about how to pronounce names of people and places.

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