

Marjerine or marg-arine? How the BBC taught us to talk proper

In the 20s and 30s, a BBC panel full of famous names tried to standardise English pronunciations. Some rules stuck, but others, such as *shee* instead of *ski*, thankfully failed

Stephen Moss

Tuesday 7 June 2016 17.39 BST

A history of the BBC's attempts to systematise the pronunciation of English does not, on the surface, sound like a gripping read. But in *Dictating to the Mob: The History of the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English*, Oxford University Press may have a surprise bestseller on its hands.

OK, I exaggerate a bit. Professor Jürg Schwyter's book is pretty academic in places, but bubbling away among all the footnotes is a wonderful sitcom about a committee of the great and the good – poet laureate Robert Bridges, playwright George Bernard Shaw, critic Lord David Cecil, art historian Kenneth Clark, novelist Rose Macaulay – tying themselves in knots trying to lay down standard pronunciation of words in English.

The committee was formed in 1926 and deliberated for the next 13 years. As the world confronted the great depression and the rise of fascism, the panjandrums commissioned by the BBC director-general, Lord Reith, grappled with how to pronounce “margarine”, eventually plumping for a soft *g*, despite the fact that the substance was derived from *margaric* (with a hard *g*) acid. History has vindicated its decision on *margarine*, but not its preference for the Norwegian *shee* over the French *ski*. Imported words were a particular problem for the committee, and much blood was spilt before the Frenchified *ga-raj* became the anglicised *ga-ridge*.

In the early years, the committee published its findings in the *Radio Times*, handing down judgments as if on tablets of stone: *gala* = *gahla*; *privacy* = *prive-acy*; *respite* = *respit*; *often* = *off-en*. It was happy to anglicise foreign placenames, preferring *Lions* to *Lyon(s)* and *Reams* to *Rheims*, and favoured standardised pronunciations of English placenames over local idiosyncrasies – *Daventry v Daintry* was a celebrated case in point.

As war clouds gathered in Europe, however, the battles between liberals and linguistic fascists on the committee became more intense, and the great Reithian project began to run into the sand. Bernard Shaw, who had succeeded Bridges as committee chairman, questioned its *modus operandi* in a letter to Reith in 1935: “Here we have 20 persons chosen as representative presentable speakers to determine polite usage. Obviously only decisions either unanimous or very nearly so could justify the corporation in declaring that one single usage is standard. Well, yesterday, decision after decision was carried by eight to seven, nine to eight, 10 to nine, and in three cases by the casting vote of the chairman, a superannuated Irishman in his 80th year.”

The committee staggered on, but it was never quite the same again. Happily, language proved too slippery to be pinned down by a group of largely upper-class writers and critics from the south of England. They were pronouncing on English as they spoke it, but there were many equally valid linguistic approaches elsewhere in the UK. As Bernard Shaw put it in another letter to Reith: “The new committee, so far, is a ghastly failure. It should be reconstituted with an age limit of 30, and a few taxi drivers on it.”

The committee was dissolved when war broke out and was never revived. Instead, it transmuted into the more modest BBC Pronunciation Unit, which advises on place names and personal names, but wisely avoids trying to lay down a template for the entire, ever-changing English language.

More features

Topics

Linguistics BBC

Save for later Article saved

Reuse this content