

Viking Yorkshire

The opening lecture for the new season by Dr. Matthew Townend attracted a large audience, and deservedly so. I found the section on Yorkshire dialect particularly interesting and would have welcomed more. Granville's apt and ready dialect quotation was a timely, if sad, reminder that fluent Yorkshire dialect speakers in everyday life have virtually disappeared, and that within one generation. Education is perhaps partly to blame for this, but also social discrimination, particularly in the world of employment. If you were a sheep farmer or even a worker in a textile mill the Yorkshire dialect was fit for that purpose, having a vocabulary and idiom which matched the needs of the job. But if you had ambitions to work behind the counter at Barclays, then it was: "Sorry, Mr. Battye. Try again when you have learnt to speak proper English." But all languages have a dynamic of their own and are in a constant state of change and flux. It will not respond to wishful thinking or to the linguistic prejudices of self-interested groups.

Recently the BBC has been celebrating the 70th birthday of the long-running programme "*Woman's Hour*". Clips from broadcasts in the 1940s and 50s have been aired, much to the amusement of many, I suspect. For not only the presenters, but also most of the contributors all spoke like the Queen. For the diktat at that time from the highest levels of the BBC that this was the only proper form of English suitable be sent over the airwaves. It mattered not a jot that 99.9% of the population in no way resembled the Queen in the way they spoke. Speak as you are spoken to, said the voice of the BBC panjandrum! He wished! By the 1960s the BBC was forced to enter the real world and regional accents are now common-place on radio and TV, and rightly so. And this reveals an interesting fact. Whilst dialects like that in Yorkshire, a language separate from mainstream English, have disappeared, regional accents, i.e. the different ways in which we all pronounce the same words, have flourished. On occasions, when I am talking to a local group on some topic, someone will say: "You're not from round 'ere, are you?" They have easily detected that my linguistic origins are in King Alfred's Wessex. (After a couple of glasses of wine my efforts to speak posh completely collapses into Thomas Hardy.) I don't think this can be classed as racial discrimination. More an expression of pity that I was not lucky enough to be born in Yorkshire. However, some may now argue that the BBC had gone too far in the opposite direction, particularly on Radio One which seems peopled by gibbering idiots breathing helium.

And what of our linguistic future? As a practising and committed old fogey I view with considerable misgivings the move among the younger generation to communicate by text. (Calling it "text speak" is a misnomer, for the whole point of texting is that you don't actually have to speak to anyone.) And therein lies the problem. As the texting language develops and becomes increasingly sophisticated in its use of symbols and abbreviations these will in turn become impossible to express in the spoken language. Will we be left with a new generation who actually find it impossible to string together a few words in a spoken sentence? Will young Prince George, when he eventually becomes King, broadcast his Christmas message to his loyal subjects entirely in smiley faces?



Or should that be - Don't ask me. I only speak English (and a bit of German, which was the same thing in 800AD)

