

Is it 'gahrage' or 'gerredge'  
and did you play 'goff' or 'golf'?

# THE EARLY BBC ON THE VEXED QUESTION OF PRONUNCIATION

**Jürg Schwyter** describes the ill-fated attempt of the early BBC's Advisory Committee to prescribe how English should be spoken.



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**T**he BBC was founded in 1922. In 1926 the first managing director, John Reith, instituted the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English, a predecessor to today’s BBC Pronunciation Unit. The Advisory Committee was to instruct newsreaders and announcers on the pronunciation of particular words, such as new terms, foreign words, rival pronunciations, surnames and place names. However, its members realised early on that the public took a keen interest in such matters and wanted guidance on how to pronounce words ‘correctly’. Therefore, the Committee published all its findings and wordlists in the *Radio Times*, and later on also in a series of

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The effects of the Advisory Committee’s work can still be felt today in the way proper names and place names are pronounced, as well as in terms of public notions of ‘correctness’.

#### **Foundations and work of the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English**

The early BBC was meant not only to entertain but also to educate the general public by bringing ‘the best’ into as many British homes as possible. To determine what ‘the best’ in language and pronunciation policy was, John Reith assembled the Advisory Committee on Spoken English. The Committee consisted of experts including well-known personalities Arthur Lloyd James (a Welsh phonetician who had advised the BBC before), Daniel Jones (Professor of Phonetics at University College London) and G. Bernard Shaw (the Irish playwright). Discussions within the BBC about linguistic standards became increasingly explicit, and the Committee saw itself not only as a linguistic role

model, to which listeners could and should aspire, but also as an active standardiser of spoken English.

Two decisions from the Advisory Committee's earliest meetings stand out. First, the committee proffered itself as the BBC's absolute authority in matters of what was referred to as 'doubtful words', i.e. those where pronunciation was variable, even among educated Received Pronunciation (RP) speakers; and second, it agreed upon a number of general principles of pronunciation so that *rules* for announcers and newsreaders could be drawn up.

The 'correct' pronunciation of 'doubtful words' not only caused much debate among Committee members and among the general public regarding hundreds of words and proper names — ranging from *again* (/ə'gen/ vs. /ə'geɪn/), *golf* (/gɒlf/ vs. /gɒf/) and *ski* (/ski:/ vs. /ʃi:/) to *margarine* (/mɑ:dʒə'ri:n/ vs. /mɑ:gə'ri:n/), the *Daventry* station (/ˈdævəntri/ vs. /ˈdeɪntri/), and *Zoological Gardens* (/zəʊˈlɒdʒɪkl/ vs. /zəʊəˈlɒdʒɪkl/) — but also led to the publication of a series of enormously popular BBC pamphlets entitled *Broadcast English: Recommendations to Announcers* (Lloyd James 1928–1939). These contained all the committee's decisions organised in a systematic way that was not matched by their recommendations published in the *Radio Times*.

Their general principles of pronunciation included the following:

- Avoidance of weakening of unstressed vowels to schwa.
- Avoidance of smoothing, i.e. a triphthong or diphthong becoming a monophthong.
- Maintenance of the so-called 'aspirated w', e.g. *which-witch*, even in Southern English.

- Articulation of final *r* and *r* between vowels, i.e. pronunciation of post vocalic *r*, even in South-Eastern English.
- Assimilation of loan words.

The Committee had further decided not to use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in order to make communication with the Press and general public easy and straightforward. All rulings were routinely published in the *Radio Times*, whose letter pages developed into a veritable forum for language prescriptivists and purists. Dozens of letters complained about the pronunciation of vowels in unstressed syllables (that is, as schwa or even its elision), of aspirated *wh*, of *r* in all its forms from postvocalic to linking and intrusive, and about the smoothing of diphthongs and triphthongs. The *wh*-aspiration question triggered months of controversy in the *Radio Times*, drawing on citations ranging from the *Oxford English Dictionary* to *Anglo-Saxon*. Concerning foreign words, *garage* was ultimately anglicized in 1930: the Committee substituted 'gahrage' for 'gerredge'.

As for postvocalic *r* and pronunciation of unstressed syllables, it was not until 1934 that the Committee finally realised that "Southern announcers cannot treat the *r* sound in the Northern manner, and very few English born speakers give to the unaccented vowels the flavour that [the Committee] recommended".

From a present-day perspective, it seems obvious that most of the Committee's general pronunciation principles were doomed to fail. They were based on spelling rather than a reflection of spoken usage, and were thus unenforceable. I would argue that by prescribing backward-looking, spelling-based pronunciations (admittedly also spurred on by listeners' notions of 'correctness'), the Committee stumbled by mistakenly seeing RP in terms of fixity rather than focus. As English philologist Jeremy Smith noted, the RP accent, rather than representing a spoken standard with established and fixed prescriptive rules, is better characterized as a target which speakers aspire to.



### The Advisory Committee on Spoken English – achievements, failures and suspension

Surprisingly, the Committee increasingly sought the public's views and often took some of their criticisms on board. By 1930 the Committee went as far as regarding *all* its decisions on pronunciation as provisional and published them as such in the Radio Times. However, the greatest achievement of the Committee was concerned more with place names and personal names than common parlance.

The Committee had decided early on to produce a pronouncing dictionary of English place names that would be of use not only to the BBC but also to the general public. A card index was compiled with some 900 English place names and their unfamiliar pronunciations. The consultation process climaxed in 1929 when Lloyd James placed a full-page appeal for place names in the Radio Times. The response was overwhelming. Although the main work on place names was undertaken by the Committee, the input from listeners should not be underestimated. An impressive pamphlet entitled *Broadcast English: Recommendations to Announcers Regarding the Pronunciation of Some English Place Names* was published in 1930, and contained some 1500 English place names. It was novel for the way it not only provided the BBC 'popular notation', but also used the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). More place name booklets followed: *Scottish Place Names* (1932), *Welsh Place Names* (1934), *Northern Irish Place Names* (1935) and *Foreign Place Names* (1937). A pamphlet on British

*Family Names and Titles* (1939) concluded the series.

So, from the late 1920s onwards, the BBC paid increasingly more attention to the public's suggestions about the pronunciation of place names and proper names in addition to words in common parlance such as *ski*, *margarine*, or *golf*. In summary, the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English could claim the following achievements:

- It drew up general pronunciation guidelines for announcers and newsreaders (and – implicitly – for the general public).
- It compiled lists of words whose pronunciation was uncertain and made recommendations for how to pronounce them.
- It published its findings and, when necessary, revised them.
- It compiled a card index for the pronunciation of place names and proper names.

But there were also severe setbacks. On the surface, the Committee continued its work – in a fashion broadly similar to that outlined here – until its suspension at the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. Below the surface, however, various difficulties, conflicts and crises arose leading to the implementation of two important and wide-ranging sets of changes in policy and structure.

First, there was a kind of opening-up process in the Committee's membership. Two waves of accession took place. The first came after a serious crisis in 1929, triggered mainly by irregular attendance and decisions taken by a majority vote in meetings where half of the Committee may have been

absent. The second, bigger wave of enlargement came in 1934, and led to the creation of a permanent specialist subcommittee whose members made recommendations *before* word lists were put to the full Committee.

By October 1938 the main Committee consisted of 18 non-specialist members, including representatives of England's high society as well as various learned societies such as The British Academy and The Royal Society of Literature, plus a four-member specialist sub-committee.

With so many people on board, comprising only a few language specialists and a majority of patronising and class-conscious amateurs, the Committee developed into a mere talking shop. Members argued, revised and re-revised decisions that had been deemed final. Not surprisingly, G. Bernard Shaw, the author of *Pygmalion*, showed not only a sense of linguistic reality but also dared to confront some of the issues that lay at the heart of the Advisory Committee's whole enterprise: that language exhibited class and age variation; that therefore pronunciation would be impossible to fix, and that very few people actually spoke with an RP accent or even wanted to (modern estimates for RP speakers range between 3% and 5%). Shaw recognised that anything beyond *advising* announcers on place names and personal names was doomed to fail.

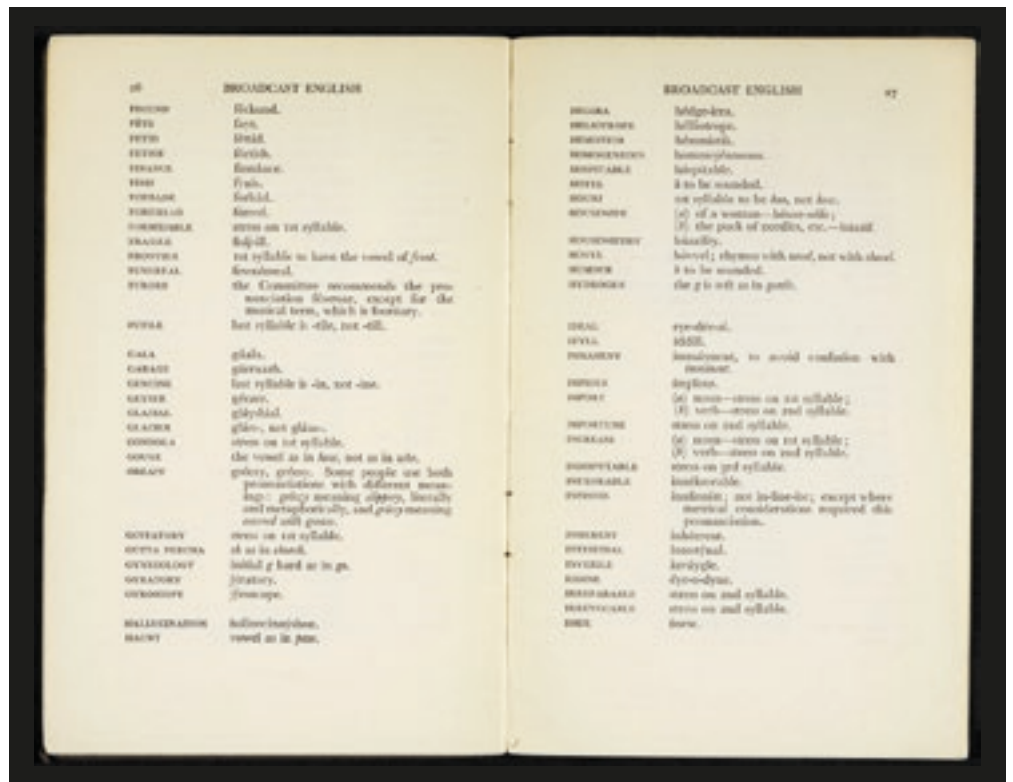
Thus the BBC decided in 1937 to suspend regular publication of the Committee's decisions in the Radio Times, and that rulings about rival pronunciations, when reached by majority voting, were not sound. Therefore, alternative pronunciations should be considered *equally*

*valid*. Instead of maintaining its previous role as absolute arbiter, the BBC would now only instruct its announcers based on the specialist members' reports and comments by the main Committee.

At the outbreak of the Second World War the Advisory Committee on Spoken English was formally suspended, although Lloyd James pushed strongly for its work to continue. The Committee had in effect run itself into the ground well before then, not only due to procedural difficulties, but above all due to the differences of opinion between the Committee's prescriptively minded versus descriptively minded members. Tellingly, the Committee was not reactivated after 1945. Instead, an internal BBC Pronunciation Unit eventually emerged in the 1940s, with Daniel Jones as Chief Pronunciation Adviser, a role he kept until his death in 1967.

**BBC pronunciations policy after the Second World War**

Today, the BBC Pronunciation Unit does not prescribe pronunciations, as the Advisory Committee did. Nor does it promote a particular accent or a single pronunciation for words with rival pronunciations. Instead, the Unit researches and *advises* on the pronunciation of place names and proper names in any language. The Unit consults not only to its large database, the origins of which go back to the time of the Advisory Committee, but also a wide range of reference works as well as native speakers from the World Service and foreign embassies. The database is computerised, complete with a speech synthesiser, and is accessible online to all BBC staff. It contains over 200,000 entries and is regularly updated whenever new pronunciations



The BBC's Recommendations for Pronouncing Doubtful Words: Broadcast English, 1929.

are researched, a process which results in roughly 50-100 new entries per week. Ahead of the 2002 Football World Cup in Japan and South Korea, for example, the Pronunciation Unit produced a special list for commentators, including not only the names of the 800 players but also the names of the various venues.

The Pronunciation Unit today works with a set of clear and narrow policies. Their recommendations are made available to all BBC staff.

The media landscape in Britain changed dramatically after 1945. The beginning of commercial television in 1955 and the emergence of private radio stations (e.g. Radio Caroline in 1964) were major contributing factors, as was the BBC's own re-launch of the Home Service as Radio 4 in 1967 and the simultaneous introduction of Radio 1, 2 and 3 as well as its first local stations. An important development during the 1970s was the introduction of new

program and reporting formats, ranging from 'on the spot' reportage to a variety of phone-in programs. The BBC thus hovered between maintaining 'standards' in language on the one hand and increasingly reflecting the voices of ordinary people on the other. In 1979, these tensions led to the Burchfield Report. The report assured the nation that there was "abundant evidence that the standard of spoken English broadcast on the BBC radio networks is in broad terms acceptable", mostly even "pleasantly presented in a variety of styles, and frequently with excellent regional or modified standard accents".

The 1980s saw two important developments: first, a de-focusing of RP into a number of 'modified RPs', where, in the words of David Crystal, "in each case the kind of modification stems from a person's regional background", which obviously varies among broadcasting networks. Second and consequently, RP 'proper'

lost the pre-eminent position it held in the first half of the 20th century and became only one accent among several that could be heard on the BBC and other broadcasting networks. Nowadays, the BBC draws on an extensive variety of accents, depending on the kind of station and the audiences targeted: local stations foster the local accent of the target community, while even highbrow stations such as Radio 3 and 4 use not only RP but also, for example, educated Scottish and Irish accents. In short, there is a move away from the kinds of socially exclusive or superior speech that the Advisory Committee on Spoken English tried to promote and towards natural, unstilted and regionally-accented speech. Additionally, there is also a kind of hierarchal organisation within individual programs: the main newsreaders, for example, tend to use an adapted or modified RP accent while reporters on the spot or specialised correspondents (such as business, science, sports or weather) are much less restricted

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Over the last 95 years, the BBC has thus moved from the ideal of the single, fixed standard accent on air to a plurality of accents; it has shifted from promoting a backward-looking model of pronunciation heavily influenced by spelling to accepting linguistic variation and change, and it has abandoned the mandatory prescription of pronunciations for common words with rival pronunciations. Thus it is only the Advisory Committee's deliberations on place names and proper names that survive into the 21st century, though even there the current Pronunciation Unit advises and no longer prescribes. Finally, as to the Reithian belief in the BBC as a 'model of correctness', Richard Sambrook, ex-director of the BBC World Service and Global News, states unequivocally: "Being a guardian of the language is not a responsibility that I want to take upon my shoulders." ¶

### Acknowledgements

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### Find out more

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