

What's in an Accent



When I was growing up in Wales I can't remember any comment being made about accent and although there was a difference in pronunciation between the Valleys and people living in cities like Cardiff it wasn't significant enough to create a separate identity.

It was different when I went to Art College because at least half the students had arrived from other parts of the UK and overseas.

My first experience of an accent making a difference to how individuals were perceived, was when I arrived in the Midlands and met people socially in pubs and clubs.

Because of my accent and quicker way of speaking, I was thought to have originated from Italy, France and even Spain.

Since in my first job I had to speak with advertisers I became more aware of people in the company trying to

speak with a more 'clipped' BBC style accent, especially on the telephone.

I felt I had to change my accent to be understood, but little did I know there was, within 5 miles of where I worked and lived, a way of talking that would identify and set apart communities of people living at the heart of England.

I well remember the first time I heard Black Country dialect because it was such a surprise and completely unexpected. It both amazed and amused me. I had never heard the English language being used in such an uninhibited way.

As mentioned, I had arrived in the Midlands from South Wales to look for employment and after many hot Summer days carrying my heavy portfolio to interviews around Birmingham City Centre, I was offered a job in the Marketing office of an engineering group. At the time I lived near Bescot on a new housing estate and travelled to and from work, in the city centre, by bus. The route meant I had to change buses at West Bromwich Bus Station to get into Birmingham and also on the return journey.

It was a typical November evening, wet, dark and cold and the journey to West Brom was quite monotonous with the bus stopping frequently.

West Bromwich bus station was busy with growing queues for each route as passengers transferred off the Birmingham bus and into the bus station. I got into my queue behind two young girls who looked like shop assistants. Then it happened!

As I put my hand into my coat pocket for my bus pass, I heard 'It ahn!' and then 'It aye!.' At first I wasn't sure exactly what I had overheard but as my senses tried to unravel the sounds, the girls said it again – 'It ahn!' – 'It aye!' and then I was lost in the sounds of their conversation and this unique way of speaking. I was transfixed because it was like listening to another language, but I could work out the gist of what was being said. I guess it was like someone telling you that you were going to have to learn another language and then finding out that it was easy to interpret some of the words. The girls' argument continued as we got onto the bus. It was about something that had happened at work that day and ended with "I bay gooin' ter tell yow agen" (I'm not going to tell you again).

I was fascinated and wanted to know more about the dialect so I found a few books about it and heard more conversations in which words like 'ahne' (isn't) and 'Aye' (is) were used frequently, along with the juxtaposition of 'her' instead of 'she' in sentences and colloquialisms like 'weem' (we are), 'our kid' (usually describing a relative) and many more used in various locations.

Dialect words have appeared in every day language for centuries. They become familiar because of their use as terms of affection, sarcasm, colloquialisms, descriptions everyday items, foods, drinks and even personal conditions. Each word or phrase, is a sort of unique shorthand in a parallel language, bringing colour and in certain circumstances a more accurate feel for what is being spoken about.

How many times have you heard a nose referred to as a 'conk', a face as a 'fizzog', head as 'bonce' and 'any road up' said with the shrug of the shoulders to mean 'anyway'. Of course with 'colourful' language comes 'colourful' people and the dialects have certainly survived through day to day conversation "how bist yow?" (How are you?), "I cor goo the'er terday" (I can't go there today), "me old mucker" (My mate), "I've nowd 'im for 'ears" (I've known him for years), 'Ers proper poorly' (she's very ill), "getting in a tiswas" (getting confused), 'Yow'm gerrin' on me wick.' (your getting on my nerves), "I'm gooin' wum" (I'm going home) etc.

Joking and criticism also play a part because you have to understand what is said to take it onboard.

"Yow big lommock" (You are clumsy), "Get out the hoss road!" (Get out of the way!), "Shut yer cake-hole" (shut your mouth), "Yo' daft clarnet!" (you daft idiot), "Hav yo no nous?" (don't you have any common sense?),

What's in an Accent continued

Traditional Storytelling, writing and Poetry from regional performers and authors have also played their part in retaining local sayings and words.

But humour and joke telling has probably had the greatest influence on the continued use of the Black Country dialect.

Much loved comedians like Tommy Mundon, Harry Harrison, Dolly Allen and Doreen Tipton have spanned generations with their unique acts, personalities and presentations.

The Black Country Society has assisted with the publication of a book celebrating the life of one of the Black Country's most loved comedians, Tommy Mundon.

His act will have included jokes about conversations between Aynuk and Ayli

Aynuk says to Ayli,
"What's a monsoon?"

Ayli says,
"that's a bloke who's nearly eighteen."

Ayli goes to the hardware shop to get some stuff to clean a paintbrush.
He says to chap behind the counter,
"Av yow got any terps?"
The assistant says,
"Do yow want VHS or Beta Max?"

Just Imagine if the Beatles had come from Gornal -
They would have wrote a song called,
'Er luvs yow Ar, Ar, Ar'

As can be seen and heard, the traditional Black Country dialect preserves many archaic traits of Early and Middle English. Thee, Thy and Thou are still in use, and the local version of "you" is still often pronounced 'yow.'

Residents of Birmingham (Brummies) often refer to by their Black Country neighbours as "Yam Yams."

This is a description probably related to the use of "Yow am" or "yow'm" (You are.)

Dialects will certainly live on in individual words and phrases, however inevitably with the passing of time, we will lose the original speakers and some of the colourful ways in which they conversed.

Fortunately regional accents are more acceptable now and even the BBC has decided to employ presenters with them. Many of today's personalities have been distinguished and become identified by the way they speak.
Who can forget Terry Wogan's 'cheery' Irish lilt, Kirsty Walsh's steely Scottish pronunciation and Huw Edwards, fronting the news with his warm rounded Welsh tones.

I have always looked back fondly on that evening in the bus station and hope the dialects of the Black Country will be preserved, at the very least, in some sort of archive for future generations to experience.

Commonly Used Words in Black Country dialect

Aer Kid or Kidda = young relative, a sibling or friend

Ah'm = I'm

Am = Are

Any road up – Anyway

Argy-bargy – Fight

Arl = I'll

Arm = I'm

Arr = Yes

Ay/Ayn = Aint

Babbie or Babby = Baby

Bin = Been

Bist yow – Are you

Blartin = Crying

Blarting – Crying

Bloke – Man

Bob-owler – Large moth

Bostin – Brilliant

Caerke'ole Mouth

Conk – Nose

Cud = Could

Cut – Canal

Cut = Canal

Dow = Don't

Duwer – Door

Fittle – Food

Fizzog – Face

Gewin or Gooin = Going

Got a cob on – In a foul mood

Gray Pays un Baircon –
Grey peas and bacon
(traditional dish)

Jammy – Lucky

Jed = Dead

Kaylied = Drunk

Loff/Laff = Laugh

Maergrum – Moodiness/pulling a face

Me/Mar = My

Med = Made

Mekkin = Making

Muwer – More

Nah = No

Nesh – Feeling the cold

On yer Tod – On your own

Oss – Horse

Oss = Horse

Ova = Over

Pace – Sandwiches

Sayin = saying

Sprog – Child

Summat = Something

Ta = Thanks

Tat = Junk

Tatting = Collecting scrap metal

Tekkin = Taking

Thay = They

Warra = What a

Wench – Woman

Werk = Work

Wossant or War/wor = Wasn't
e.g. it war/wor 'im

Yam = You are

Yed = Head

Yow = You

I hope that you have liked my story.

I have now spent over 40yrs living and working in the Black Country and I have enjoyed the experience enormously.

Brian Ridout
Publisher - the Blackcountryman