Language and Identity in Australia

"Socio-economic background in Australia is not as visible as race and ethnicity in the United States, nor is it as obvious as class in the UK." (Moodie 2003, p. 35)

The manner of speaking is an expression of identity; it signals identification with one group and rejection of another. For example, when soccer player David Beckham says, "I want to thank everyone for coming", his substitution of an 't' for the 'th' sound shows pride in his working class roots.

In England, accents vary according to class and region. In America, they vary according to race and region. Unlike America or England, Australia has no variance in speaking according to class, race, or region. Instead, the accent varies according to ideology or gender. Two Australians can grow up side by side, go to the same schools, do the same job, but end up speaking English in different words, different syntax and with different accents. In fact, due to the gender variance, a brother and sister can grow up in the same house and end up speaking differently.

Australia has three recognised accents. About ten per cent of Australians speak like ex-prime minister Bob Hawke with what is known as a broad Australian accent. The broad Australian accent is usually spoken by men. 80 per cent speak like Nicole Kidman with a general Australian accent. 10 per cent speak like ex-Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser with British received pronunciation or cultivated English. Although some men use the pronunciation, the majority of Australians that speak with the accent are women. It is a myth that working class Australians use Cockney like David Beckham. It is a myth that Queenslanders speak differently to South Australians. It is also a myth that children of migrants have distinct accents.

The gender difference in pronunciation can perhaps be attributed to differing expectations about gender identities that are relatively favourable to the Australian stereotype when it comes to men but unfavourable when it comes to women. Specifically, expectations that men should be unpretentious, laid back and friendly are relatively consistent with stereotypes of Australian men. Contrasted to men, expectations that women should be refined, proper and neat are relatively inconsistent with stereotypes of Australian women.

The Aussie Sheila

Wanna cuppa? Would you care for some tea?
Go and fast yourself up. Please dress in your best clothes.
Wanna come to our disco? You are invited to our party.
How ya goin? I hope you are feeling well.
Don't get your knickers in a twist. Don't upset yourself.
What's the latest news? Any juicy news?

The Aussie Gentleman

You should be proud of your appearance. Don't twitch in your seat. Your appearance is no longer required. You are invited to our party.
Of course I'm helping the bank. Put ya hand in it. You may be rich beyond your dreams.

Although the connotations of stereotypes are subjective, arguably most Australians would agree that the traditional male Australian stereotype is more positive than the traditional Australian female stereotype. The difference in values provides the best explanation for the gender difference in pronunciation with Australian women not wanting to sound, bogan, ocker or stereotypically Australian.
Broad Australian Accent

The broad Australian accent is typically associated with Australian masculinity. Notable speakers include ex-Prime Minister Bob Hawke, comedian Paul Hogan and actor Bill Hunter. Although the accent is only spoken by a minority of the population, it has a great deal of cultural credibility. This is shown by the fact that it is disproportionately used in advertisements and by newscasters.

Very few women use broad Australian accents, probably because the accent is associated with Australian masculinity. If an Australian woman used it, she may sound like a woman partial to a spot of pig shooting or making fart jokes.

Nicole Kidman's Photos of Her Children Ellen Degeneres

Nicole Kidman - general Australian English

General Australian Accent

Around 80 per cent of Australians speak like actor Nicole Kidman with what is known as a general Australian English accent. These accents are somewhat of a mix between the broad Australian and cultivated accents. Because they are comparatively neutral in ideology, most of the speakers believe that they don't have an accent. The speakers realise that they speak differently to the broad Australian speakers that they associate with Australia as well as the cultivated speakers that they associate with upper class or elitism.
Cultivated Australian Accent

The final ten percent of Australians speak with what is known as a cultivated accent, which sounds a bit like Prince Charles. It is usually spoken by women wanting to portray a feminine and sophisticated image. Although most speakers are women, some men, such as ex-prime minister Malcolm Fraser, use the accent.

In the past, the cultivated accent had the kind of cultural credibility that the broad accent has today. For example, until the 1970s, newsreaders on the government-funded ABC had to speak with the cultivated accent. Since there was a shortage of Australian men able to speak in the accent, male newsreaders were imported from England. (At the time, women were not allowed to be newsreaders on government television.)

Myths about the Australian accent

Myth 1 – There is regional variance in pronunciation

There is a myth that Australians speak differently in different parts of Australia. For example, some people believe that all Queenslanders use the broad Australian accent. The stereotype is not based in fact. Queenslanders have the same variance in accent according to gender and ideology that is seen around Australia.

Some people believe that South Australians talk like New Zealanders. The myth probably comes from a presumption that since South Australia and New Zealand didn’t receive Convicts, both should speak the same way. Again, the presumption is incorrect. South Australians have the same variance in accent according to gender and ideology that is seen around Australia.

Although the myths of regional variance are common, it is unlikely that the geographical origin of a player on the Australian cricket team or in an AFL team could be discerned from their accent alone. Likewise, it is unlikely that the geographic origin of a federal politician could be discerned from their accent alone.

Myth 2 – There is ethnic variance in pronunciation

Most migrants who speak English as their second language have an ethnic accent. The children of migrants, who speak English as their first language, usually use a broad, general or cultivated accent depending upon their ideology or gender.

Sometimes the children of migrants will put on the accent of their parents as a joke. For example, actor Mary Coustas created the character of Effie, which used a wog accent. It was not her real accent.
Myth 3 – Poor Australians speak with a broad Australian, cockney or low class accent

Much like the character of Effie, the characters of Ken & Kim involved the creation of fictional stereotypes of low-class Australians that could be subsequently mocked. Contrary to the fictional portrayals, there is no relationship between socio-economic status and the manner of speaking. It is, however, more likely that women from wealthy families will speak with a cultivated accent because it is more likely that their parents will send them to a finishing school to cultivate a manner of speaking associated with elegance. The elegant image will be beneficial for the woman because, as the characters of Kath & Kim and Effie show, there is ridicule associated with Australian women who lack elegance when speaking.

Unlike Australian women, Australian men will rarely be sent to finishing schools in order to improve their speech. This is probably because elegance is not an admired masculine quality in Australia. An Australian man that speaks like Prince Charles or Malcolm Fraser is likely to find himself the target of school yard bullies.

The broad Australian accent has cultural prestige for men because it creates an image that the man has the ability to relate to people from all walks of life, and will treat everyone with a sense of equality. For example, even though the late billionaire Kerry Packer was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he used a broad accent his entire life. The broad accent helped create a perception that Packer had an egalitarian ethic, which contributed greatly to his popular appeal amongst average Australians. Of course, not all Australians (i.e., Malcolm Fraser) believe that the broad accent has a positive image. As a result, they prefer to speak like an Englishman.

Kath and Kim - Stereotype bogan accent

Malcolm Fraser and Julian Burnside using cultivated accents to talk about Australian values.

Features of the Australian English

Use of idioms

In stereotype, "g'day" is a word that helps define the Australian version of English but in truth, it is not common used. The use of idioms like 'have a crack' and 'play a straight bat' are more defining. In addition, Australians are prone to use similes like 'mad as a gum tree full of galahs' and 'he has kangaroo lose in the top paddock' to add more expression to sentences. Former Prime Minister Paul Keating was an avid inventor of similes and metaphor as an instrument of ridicule and humour. Some of his expressions included:

Keating on Former Leader of the Opposition, John Hewson:

(His performance) is like being fogged with a warm lettuce leaf.

I have a psychological hold over Hewson...He's like a stone statue in the cemetery.
I'm not going to be fairly flossed away as my opposite number, John Hewson, is prepared to be fairly flossed away by some spiced out, vacuous ad agency.

On Former Leader of the Opposition, Andrew Peacock

"I suppose that the Honourable Gentleman's hair, like his intellect, will recede into the darkness."

"We're not interested in the views of painted, perfumed gigolos."

"I was nearly chloroformed by the performance of the Honourable Member for MacKellar. It nearly put me right out for the afternoon."

On John Howard

"What we have got is a dead carcass, swinging in the breeze, but nobody will cut it down to replace him."

"But I will never get to the stage of wanting to lead the nation standing in front of the mirror each morning clipping the eyebrows here and clipping the eyebrows there with Jonetto and the kids: It's like 'Spot the eyebrow.'"

"I am not like the Leader of the Opposition. I did not slobber out of the Cabinet room like a mangy moggie..."

On Independent, Steele Hall:

"The Honourable Member has been in so many parties he is a complete political harlot."

On the press

"You (Richard Carleton) had an important place in Australian society on the ABC and you gave it up to be a pop star...with a big cheque...and now you're on to this sort of stuff. That shows what a 24 curt pissant you are, Richard, that's for sure."

Reporter: How long is it since you've been to Pyshwick Markets?

Keating: "Not long, not long. In fact if you get down to woolies at Manuka on Saturday I'd probably run over you with a trolley as I did a journey recently."

On the coalition party

"Honourable Members opposite are a joke. "They are irrelevant, useless and immoral." "...they insist on being mugs, Mr Speaker, absolute mugs."

"The Opposition crowd could not ruffle a chook in a pub"

"Honourable Members opposite squeal like stuck pigs"

On former Prime Minister Bob Hawke

"Now listen mate," [to John Brownie, Minister of Sport, who was proposing a 110 per cent tax deduction for contributions to a Sports Foundation] "you're not getting 110 per cent. You can forget it. This is a fucking Boulevard Hotel special, this is. The trouble is we are dealing with a sports jemake here [gesturing towards Bob Hawke]. I go out for a piss and they pull this one on me. Well that's the last time I leave you two alone. From now on, I'm sticking to you two like shit to a blanket."

On Former Labour politician, Jim McClelland:

"That you Jim? Paul Keating here. Just because you swallowed a fucking dictionary when you were about 15 doesn't give you the right to pour a bucket of shit over the rest of us."

On Fund Managers:

"...these donkeys... "It must get right up their nose, quaffing down the red wine at these fashionable outeries in Bent Street and Collins Street, with the Prime Minister calling them donkeys - but donkeys they are.""

The Convict Influence?

Nearly two generations after the First Fleet, 87 per cent of the population were either convicts, ex-convicts or of convict descent. With such strong convict foundations, it was inevitable that Australia's linguistic traditions would be different from the mother country. As argued by Sidney Baker in The Australian Language:

"No other class of society would use slang more readily or adapt it more expertly to their new environment; no other class would have a better flair for concocting new terms to fit in with their new conditions in life."

In 1869, Marcus Clarke described how locals devised language to "convey a more full and humorous notion of all his thoughts or to conceal the idea he wishes to convey from all save his own particular friends. The most notable method of concealment was cockney rhyming slang. Rhyming slang created an idiom type sentence out of two or more words, the last of which rhymes with the intended word. For example, "plates of meat" were "feet" and "hit the frog and road" was "hit the road." Although few Australians use rhyming slang today, its legacy may be the prevalence of idioms in Strine.

The abbreviation of words might be another legacy of rhyming slang. As rhyming slang involved the addition of new words, sentences became long-winded. In order to compensate, long words might have been shortened. Then "have a Captain Cook," which is rhyming slang for "have a look," was abbreviated down to "ave Captain." Pomegranate, which is rhyming slang for "immigrant," was abbreviated to "Ponk."

The skills that were acquired when abbreviating rhyming slang clauses may then have been applied to also economise ordinary clauses. So words such as "good day" were economised to "g'day", "afternoon" to "arvo", "politician" to "polite", "journalist" to "journo" and "barbecue" to "barbie."
Aside from rhyming slang, another method the convicts used to conceal their true meaning was to turn the meaning of a word upside down. For example, "bustard" or "ratbag" were used in the same way. The only way to know up from down was to infer from the tone of the sentence.

Has Chinese influenced the Australian accent?

The Australian strain of English is very musical. Tones are very important, and with the abbreviation of words to emphasize the stressed syllable, Australian English follows the general pattern of how English sounds when it is sung. In 1911, an English woman, Valerie Desmond, released a book titled The Awful Australian. In the book, she speculated that the tonal aspect of Australian English may have been the result of Australians mixing with Chinese:

"But it is not so much as the vagaries of pronunciation that hurt the ear of the visitor. It is the extraordinary intonation that the Australian imparts to his phrases. There is no such thing as cultured, reposeful conversation in this land; everybody sings his remarks as if he was reciting blank verse in the manner of an unperforct elocutionist. It would be quite possible to take an ordinary Australian conversation and immortalize its cadences and intonations by means of musical notation. Herein the Australian differs from the American. The accent of the American, educated and uneducated alike, is abhorrent to the cultured Englishman or Englishwoman, but it is, at any rate, harmonious. That of the Australian is full of discords and surprises. His voice rises and falls with unexpected syncopations, and, even among the few cultured persons this country possesses, seems to bear in every syllable the sign of the parvenu. The Australian practice of singing his remarks I can only ascribe to the influence of the Chinese. During my stay in Melbourne, I spent one evening at supper in a Chinese cookshop in Little Bourke Street, and I was instantly struck by the resemblance between the intonation of the phrases between the Chinese attendants and that of the cultivated Australians who accompanied me."

More reading


