

## THE STANDARDIZATION OF ENGLISH SPEECH.

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The literary reviewer of the *Times* recently discussed "English Pronunciation," by Robert Bridges, the newly created Poet Laureate. He summed up the first change in regard to the degradation of our unaccented vowels, as "the blurring and running together of *a* and *e* and *o* and *u* into one indeterminate sound — the sound of the last syllable in *danger* — in which the Canadian hears no sound of *r*. He noted finally: "If we add to these the bogus pronunciations produced by unphonetic spelling, and the English habit of 'swallowing' words, there can be little doubt, for anyone who carefully observes his own utterance or that of his friends, that the speech of the educated classes in England is undergoing serious changes at the present moment. That these changes are regrettable most of us will admit. Whether or not they can be checked, or must be allowed to work their will unimpeded in the language, is another question."

About a month earlier Mr. W. D. Lighthall was denouncing the "defective English spoken in Canada" before the Royal Society at Ottawa.

In 1911, at the official Education Conference of the Education Departments of the Empire in London, where the simplification of English spelling was unanimously resolved to be *urgent*, high authorities from every quarter of the globe gave strong testimony to the tendency of variation, for some of which our present orthodox — but deformed — spelling was held responsible.

It was maintained, however, by your humble servant that the change of pronunciation today all over the world is going on at a very much slower rate than in the island of Great Britain before the day of general public education. Defective as are the keys to pronunciation in our dictionaries, there is evidently more stability in the qualities of speech at the beginning of this century than ever before. With a phonetic alphabet, or even without, we should now be able to transmit a uniform speech from the Planes of Shinar to the Isles of the Pacific, and from the date of the completion of the Oxford Dictionary to the final doomsday.

The anatomical diagrams of the numerous valuable texts on phonetics, and the ingenious notations of speech made visible, may not alone be able to accomplish it, but with the admirable and absolute physical standard now possible in the phonograph we shall be able to transmit speech with precision uniformly over the surface of the globe and down the ages. Those who already in correspondence schools are learning to speak foreign languages from the phonograph, the thousands who already are answering their correspondence by speaking into the dictaphone and sending to their stenographers sound-engraved cylinders suggestive of the literary vehicles of ancient Sumir and Accad, the tens of thousands who now nightly see and hear the opera and the drama through the magic of the kinetophone — all these people need no further evidence of the present possibility of recording with precision the sounds of speech and the multiplication of its records indefinitely.

All we need now is the *standard speech*. Its records

multiplied by electrotypy can be made one of the cheaper essentials of every teachers' training college or school where English is used. The first work of all candidates for the teaching profession should be the complete mastery of the standard alphabetic sounds, which in turn it would be their duty to develop in the speech of every pupil in their schools. We find at present under good teachers that the Scotch, Irish and Welsh speak more distinctly than English people, who are not aware their pronunciation is not standard. When people who can use their vernacular dialects speak English more distinctly than the English themselves, we may be certain the standard English pronunciation can be very approximately acquired in any schools in any country.

But how shall we get the Standard English? Possibly no present dialect would be universally acceptable. But a competent and authoritative Commission might be able to agree upon an eclectic standard, the different standard sounds being selected on the merits of their musical quality and their distinctness from each other. These fundamental alphabetic sounds should be as few as possible for economic reasons, as well as for the greater ease of general mastery. Their aesthetic qualities would be none the less on this account.

The standard sounds spoken into the phonograph by a generally acknowledged beautiful speaker would be the fundamental feature — a standard for imitation; while phonetic texts, with their diagrams, signs, and exposition, would undoubtedly still be useful.

With a phonetic alphabet adapted to such a standard of sounds, the common sense of the people would be likely soon to insist on the rationalising of spelling, so that the written and spoken languages — the two now widely different — would become one, — beautiful, simple, and capable of continuing uniform throughout space and time.

Does not some such programme promise something attainable? Is it not worth some avocational effort at least on the part of everyone interested in the teaching and even the use of our language?

Many of our readers will be interested in Dr. MacKay's opinions as to the need of a standard speech, and the means by which it may be established. His article is reprinted in full from the "Teacher's World" (London) where it appeared in August, 1913. The supplement to the same issue contained an article on the subject by Professor Rippmann, Chief Inspector of schools to the London University, which is in substantial agreement with that of Dr. MacKay. Professor Rippman reminds us that the idea of an infallible authority on pronunciation is not very old.

In the sixteenth century there was doubtless a good deal more variety in "polite speech" than now, though not so much as the spelling of that age suggests. There were no pronouncing dictionaries in those days. Dr. Johnson, in 1755, only indicated which syllable was stressed. James Buchanan in 1757 was (as he maintained) "the first who endeavored to make the proper pronunciation of our