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Windsor P. Daggett

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UGLY WORDS

WINDSOR P. DAGGETT
New York City

TWO of the ugliest words that I have heard during the past season are "quarrelled" as pronounced by Olga Petrova in her play, "The White Peacock," and "torrents" as pronounced by a United States senator from the Middle West.

Madame Petrova, portraying a Russian woman educated in France, concocted a stage dialect in which she featured a bechoked uvula-R. This R made by trilling the uvula (the tag of the soft palate) against the back of the tongue, is not unpleasant in cultured French. Even in English, as spoken by Irene Bordoni and the French actors in her company playing "The French Doll," the uvula-R has a clearness and brilliance approaching the lingual trilled-r. But the uvula-R is not English, and it is gratingly alien and repugnant when the uvula trill is thick and throaty and sluggish as it is in Madame Petrova's stage dialect.

To say "quarrelled" with the vowels suffocated in the flesh-pads of the back tongue and soft palate and to complete the strangulation with an l-sound as thick as an oyster, is to disgrace English with disrespect.

The United States senator from the Middle West has a prominent nose filled with tone. He gave the o-sound in "torrents" the sound of back-a, the a-sound in "father," but farther back on the tongue, and he nasalized his vowels. He had a tongue stricture on r-sounds, a stricture that stiffens the tongue, pulls it into the throat, and curls its tip backward. He couldn't pour out the word "torrents" through his muscular barricades, but he could hold it fast in the clutch of his tongue and nose. He could intensify his breath, and with the poise of an orator, he could demonstrate that a "torrent" is a mighty piece of anatomy.

When the senator came to an oratorical period on the "kahmurs of the wurrd" (commerce of the world), his vocal apparatus was rigid with muscular satisfaction.

Since starting this collection of ugly words, I have heard a highly recommended elocutionist recite at a literary vesper. She is a teacher from an eastern state. She has a Master's Degree from some college, and a Teacher's Diploma from one of the leading schools of oratory in the country. This product of American education in speech, had the senator's back-a in mild form, and the senator's inverted—r. Her voice was not nasal, but considering that she represented the training of an American college, of a school of oratory, and the teaching profession, her voice was vulgar and her pronunciation crude.

Her worst word was "world," to which she gave two syllables suggesting an Irish brogue. To make the word more grand, she restricted the tongue on the r-sound as if to run the vowel through with a strong skewer that would hold it in the oven till it was done brown.

This artist read "Crossing the Barrr" (Bar), and selections from Browning's "Prospice." She recited, "Fearrr Death" and the "Press of the Storm." She discussed Browning as a philosopher and then in the Epilog" she expanded on "fahncies free" (fancies free). "Fancy" pronounced with a broad-a is always a mark of limitation in the use of cultured English. In "Prospice" she poured forth, "Let me taste the hul of it." At least, "whole" was said in a rural dialect. She came to a conclusion with these words:

"With Gahd be the rest."

I was too deep in my boots to bow my head at the name of the deity.

A group of teachers in the vicinity of New York, who have made an honest effort to improve their speech, gave a play. They cannot be commended too highly for their pre perseverance in attempting to overcome the imperfections which their earlier education left untouched. If some of their defects are here recalled, the purpose intended is to show the sort of speech that American children are nourished on in the lower grades.

To give the teacher a name, Julia said "begahn" (began) with back-a. This means that her a-sounds are all too far back on the tongue. Consequently, when she says the diphthongal i-sound in "time," which begins with an a-sound, she demonstrates one of the most faulty pronunciations in New York City dialect,—a

pronunciation in which the neat and fronted i-sound begins backward in the mouth and works forward on the tongue by inches.

When "bargain" is said with this back-a, in a mouth scattering and immodestly open, and with a feeble plosion on the b-sound, the word loses its beginning, its middle, and its end. To make up for this scattering waste of breath, the back mouth instinctively makes some local effort to get the wingless word out of the nest. The object is never accomplished.

Miss Proteus had a New Jersey r-sound at the end of all words ending in "er," and she said "news" and "tunable" with the oo-sound in "boot" instead of the u-sound in "use."

Julia, fearing to run words together said "found each" with an off-glide on the d-sound, followed by a pause before "each,"—"founder each." That is the very sort of artificiality that teachers should correct in students. Is speech a mere matter of words?

A bright Anglo-Saxon boy in New York City tells me that his teacher in the public school insists that in reading aloud, the class pronounce by the spelling as literally as possible. The pupil who sounds every final consonant on a word, and reads "bread and butter" as three separate strong words, is the teacher's favorite reader. This same boy tells me that the singing teacher who comes to this school has the class protude their lips and push them out as far as possible when they sing, as pushing the lips forward is very beneficial in voice production!

This boy's older brother is a theological student within a hundred miles of New York City. The member of the theological faculty delegated to teach the "art of speech" to the prospective American preachers, teaches his students to twist the r-sound with the senatorial inversion which is part of the dialect in New Jersey.

Another son of New Jersey was educated at an eastern college. He now teaches in an exclusive private school in the vicinity of New York. His local Jersey dialect has never been touched or corrected in the course of his education. He will go on to the end of his days teaching vowel twists and the senatorial-r to the rising sons of Wall Street bankers.

Olga Petrova is a foreigner. Her speech does not represent the American public, American culture, or the American stage. Our United States senator represents America, and our teachers referred to represent American education, in university, in training

school, school of oratory, and theological seminary. My illustrations are somewhat warped and one-sided, but they strike an average. The ugly thing is that comparing Olga Petrova with American educators, she isn't so bad after all.

The teachers are not to blame. The Boards of Education are not to blame. We have not had much knowledge in the past to apply speech. Even if we have had the knowledge, the machinery has not been working. The awakening has come. The science of English speech has gone through a long process of clarification in Germany, in Scandinavia, and in England. There is a great body of literature on the subject. England has made progress in teaching standard English in the training colleges and in the public schools. It is now easy to talk intelligently about standards, and the science of speech offers as much fascination as the imagery of literature.

Walter Ripman, of London University, wrote the other day: "I have just returned from a short lecturing tour in Norway and Sweden. I told stories, at Kristiania, to a gathering of 1100 school children and their teachers. Everywhere I found the greatest keenness to learn English."

The Board of Education in England, in its report on "The Teaching of English," 1921, has come to this conclusion:

"It is emphatically the business of the Elementary School to teach all its pupils who either speak a definite dialect or whose speech is disfigured by vulgarisms, to speak standard English, and to speak it clearly, and with expression. Our witnesses are agreed that this can be done, provided that definite and systematic teaching is given from the outset. It is not sufficient merely to correct the various errors of pronunciation as they occur, or to insist on the children 'speaking out.' They should learn to recognize every sound in standard English, should observe the position for themselves how sounds are produced and modified by the position of the speech organs, and should practice producing them properly. The really scientific method, of course, would be to associate each sound with a phonetic symbol."

With regard to the training of teachers, the report makes this recommendation:

"That through the two year's course students should devote an hour weekly to Phonetics and speech training; that increased

attention should be paid in the Training Colleges to Spoken English; that an oral test should form an essential part of the examination in English; and that a compulsory 'language' test should be included."

London has made progress. Classes for teachers in phonetics and voice production have been largely attended. Many undesirable forms of London speech have been eliminated in the schools. New York City has its phonetic centers, and many teachers in America who have sat under the hammer of Mr. William Tilly's phonetic classes at Columbia University are bringing scientific knowledge and historic vision to bear upon the problem of American speech.

The British Board does not aim to suppress dialects that have historical background. It does insist on the importance of making students bi-lingual. They shall be taught to keep their regional dialect free from vulgarisms, and they shall be taught to compare their dialectic forms with the usage of standard English.

This is the training that every actor goes through on the London stage or on the stage of New York City. The r-sounds of the United States senator from the Middle West, the back-a sounds of the teachers who gave a play, the vocal malformations of the elocutionist from an American school of oratory, are not heard from first class actors on the American stage. The actor is purged before he is ready for public approval. Even from our younger actors who bring seriousness to the stage, we hear standard English. We have only to think of Doris Keane, Wallace Eddinger, Marjorie Rambeau, Catherine Cornell, Clara Eames, Gail Kane, Margaret Lawrence, and Pedro de Cordoba, to know that the American actor can hold his own with the British actor in this respect.

But the stage can not stand alone as an exemplar of standard speech. Until the school-boy and teacher, the senator and the preacher has his ear tuned to the sounds of English, the American language will be an assortment of ugly words.