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VOICES: A CASE STUDY IN THE EVOLUTION OF A LINGUISTIC CLIMATE AT THE BBC

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BBC interest about language can be found from the earliest days of its institution, as Simon Elmes (this volume) notes, and regional programmes on local usage were being made as early as the 1930s, but nothing quite matches the flowering of interest in linguistic issues during the 1980s, which helped form the climate for the *Voices* project. This was a decade when the BBC was becoming increasingly concerned about what to do with the volume of correspondence it was receiving from listeners about English usage. Hundreds of letters were being received every week, and there was nowhere for them to go but the Pronunciation Unit. However, many of the topics had nothing to do with pronunciation. Although regional accents, sound changes, and perceived errors (such as intrusive *r*) were common themes, most letters dealt with topics in grammar and vocabulary, which went well beyond the Unit's remit. What should be done with them?

In 1980, a decision was made to address the issue on air. The first I knew about it was when I received a request to write a programme based on this correspondence for Radio 4. Why me? I imagine I must have acquired a limited profile due to a pair of programmes on English usage I had written and presented for Radio 3 in 1976 (*You Said It*), along with sporadic broadcasts I had made since my first foray into the medium in 1965. Whatever the origins of the idea, the outcome was breathtaking. I was sent all the correspondence that was on file – a large postbag full of cards and letters – and asked to make sense of it. The resulting programme, whose title reflected the typically intransigent tone of the letter-writers, was *How Dare You Talk to Me Like That!* (4 July 1981). I analysed the subject-matter and came up with a 'top twenty' list of complaints. The talk was published in *The Listener* (9 July) and the reaction was so great that it was repeated twice over the following six months. The amount of correspondence on usage to the BBC significantly increased, as a consequence. I know, because

they kept on sending it to me. I still have most of it, though some of it is archived in the University of Reading library.

This process continued during the 1980s. Radio 4, sensing a new mood, and noting the popular response, tasked a producer (Alan Wilding) to take the usage theme forward, and during the decade I worked with him on several 15-minute programmes: two series called *Speak Out* in 1982, and five series of *English Now* in 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988, and 1990. I had suggested 30-minute programmes, but there was a reluctance at the BBC to devote so much time to the matter. I sensed there was a big psychological difference in-house between a 15-minute and a 30-minute programme. My interpretation was that the former was enough to 'keep listeners happy' on a sensitive subject (such as language), whereas the latter was a serious attempt to engage with the subject. As a new area of broadcasting, the decision-makers felt that 30-minute slots were premature, and I was actually told this by Huw Weldon when I addressed a meeting of department heads at Broadcasting House in 1987 on language policy. But as the decade wore on, and other programmes came to be made (see below), the climate seemed to be changing. Accordingly, I made a fresh proposal in early 1992 for a half-hour series, as a follow-up to *English Now*, to be called *Language Now*, but I was too late. The slot had already been filled by Frank Delaney's new series, *Word of Mouth*, which began later that year, produced by Simon Elmes. Frank had previously created and presented *Bookshelf* for Radio 4, was well aware of the growing popular interest in language, and had lots to say about it. Indeed, he had been a guest on *English Now* at one point. Stimulated by a chance listening to the phrase *word of mouth* heard in song lyrics during a transatlantic plane journey, he came up with what has proved to be the most successful of all radio series on language. He presented it himself for several years, Michael Rosen taking over in 1998. Regional speech has been a recurrent theme.

Accents had never been a dominant theme of *English Now*, because Stanley Ellis was presenting his own series on local speech during the same period: *Talk of the Town*, *Talk of the Country*. But I couldn't ignore the topic, as it loomed large in the correspondence. And one of the guests I had in my first series was Susan Rae, who had become a presenter on Radio 4, and whose lilting Dundee tones had attracted aggressive mail from listeners accusing the BBC of deteriorating standards of pronunciation. I see her as a personification of the changing linguistic climate within the BBC over the following 25 years. Dropped from her Radio 4 presenting role, her voice remained off-air for some time, but reappeared in the 2000s as part of the reappraisal of the role of regional speech, of which the *Voices* project was a culmination. Her Scottish voice now regularly presents the news on Radio 4 – an analogous development to Huw Edwards' Welsh voice on BBC 1.

The 1980s was a very important decade in fostering this new linguistic climate, and it should not be ignored. In my view, television was the key factor. In 1982, following up the popular interest in the *Speak Out* radio series, in which I had interviewed several TV personalities (such as newsreader Richard Whitmore

and sports commentator Frank Bough) about their use of language, I wrote to the Controller of Programmes at the BBC proposing a corresponding series for television. The Head of Continuing Education, Sheila Innes, arranged a meeting with departmental producers, and a great deal of stimulating discussion took place. There was no lack of interest, but no consensus emerged about how to channel it. My impression was that the subject of language fell between the remits of the various departments (such as current affairs, education, and history). Belonging to everyone, it therefore belonged to no-one. The outcome, anyway, was that the proposal never went ahead.

My proposal was for a series on 'language', not just on English, and this is an important distinction. There was an understandable uncertainty about how a supposedly abstract subject, 'language', could be presented visually. (Interestingly, I had had precisely the same reaction to the initial proposal for what would later that decade be *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Crystal 1987). This had been turned down by two publishers on the grounds that they could not see how a book 'on language with pictures' could possibly work.) Sheila Innes, noting the point, followed it up with a suggestion that a more focused theme could be a better option. A producer from BBC Education, Bernard Adams, was asked to take this forward, and in 1983 he came up with a series idea, tentatively called 'Your English'. We jointly shaped the proposal, and it was submitted, but again it never went ahead.

However, there was clearly a desire to do something on television, and the next proposal was to resurrect the 'About Language' idea (as it was then being called), offering a blend of 'popular linguistics and language awareness... including elements of Your English, and drawing upon many languages other than English' (letter to me from Sheila Innes, 1 May 1985). Terry Doyle, a senior producer for foreign language output at BBC Continuing Education, took the idea forward, but again, it never went ahead, presumably because plans were already quite advanced for a much bigger project at BBC2, *The Story of English*.

This was a nine-part documentary (495 minutes in all), written by Robert MacNeil, Robert McCrum, and William Cran, and aired worldwide in 1986 (a co-production with the Public Broadcasting Service in the USA). It was widely acclaimed, receiving an Emmy Award and later published as a book. I had very little involvement, other than being used as a consultant for a couple of the programmes. But later I was asked, along with Tom McArthur (the editor of *English Today*), to produce the parallel radio series for the World Service. I thought it would be a straightforward job, as we were being given access to all the television tapes, but soon learned that television does not translate into radio. There were simply too many pictures telling the story! The voices and voiceovers were of secondary importance to the film-makers, and too fragmentary to be directly transferred into a non-pictorial medium. It meant we had to write the scripts from scratch, though having available the same bank of recordings that the television series had used. Once again, regional speech – on

a global level, this time – was being given the importance it deserved. Eighteen half-hour programmes were the result, produced by Hamish Norbrook, and broadcast in 1987.

The Story of English, I have no doubt, was a turning-point. It showed that language could be treated televisually, and was not just a topic for radio. Apart from anything else, it presented the *written* language (never a good bet for radio), and it presented the *people* in a way that an audio medium cannot – and there is no language without people. With its global remit, the accents of the world came across beautifully as part of the story, such as the interviews with people on Tangier Island, off the east coast of the USA, where the myth that Elizabethan English was still to be heard there was explored. It also brought a renewed interest in the possibility of a corresponding series on language. If *The Story of English*, then why not *The Story of Language*?

This was in fact a proposal made by Clive Doig, a producer at an independent TV company, Brechin Productions, at around the time *The Story of English* was being made, but postponed for that reason. In 1987 *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* was published, which Clive saw as full of televisual potential, so he resuscitated the idea in 1989, first calling it *The Language Lab*, and then revising it a year later as *The Story of Language*, which he described as 'a tele-encyclopaedia of the languages of the world', and giving dialects a special mention. He sent this in to John Slater, managing editor for history and archaeology at the BBC, and over the next two years the proposal went through various revisions (and titles – *The Tour of Babel*, *The Search for Babel*...) to suit Slater's requirements which, as a historian, he summarized as the need to 'discover history through language'. In early 1991, a meeting was arranged at the Groucho Club in London to take things forward (memorable, as there was a power cut, and we had to discuss language themes by candle-light). But the romantic atmosphere didn't last: the historical angle disappeared when, soon after, there was a hierarchy change, and a new senior manager, interested more in anthropology than history, asked for a fundamental revision. But our energy, after five reworkings, had gone. I had a sense of *déjà vu*: where, in the vast domain of public broadcasting, would the subject of language ever comfortably fit?

BBC Wales was one place. In Wales, the subject of language had come to the fore as part of the push to obtain official recognition for Welsh, and this was reflected by an increase in programmes on language emanating from that channel. On radio, at various times until 1993, I had a weekly language slot (usually five minutes or so) in the shows hosted by Hywyl Gwynfryn and Mal Pope. It was rare for a week to go by without the topic of accents and dialects being raised, and in 1991 speech variation played a central role (along with song) in a TV documentary called *The Welsh Voice*. But it was the status and future of Welsh which captured broadcasters' imagination. Over the next ten years, I know of ten proposals for programmes or series focusing on the history of Welsh or on the broader topic of language endangerment and death, and one would eventually be made (see below). English accents paled by comparison. But

this period of linguistic enthusiasm in Wales was crucial, as one of the leading motivations for the *Voices* project would, ten years later, come from Cardiff.

The 1980s was also the decade in which the repercussions of the 1975 'Bullock Report', *A Language for Life*, were working their way through the schools. This had emphasized the importance of 'language across the curriculum', bringing together mother-tongue and foreign-language learning, and fostering a climate out of which came such expressions as KAL ('Knowledge About Language') and 'language awareness'. One of the consequences was that the BBC was approached by the Schools Broadcasting Council to include a fresh language element in its provision, and this added to the linguistically aware climate which was slowly emerging. Two parallel strands were commissioned. The first was aimed at secondary schools: *Patterns of Language*, a series of ten 15-minute programmes produced by Al Wolff, broadcast in 1986, and focusing on pupils, aged 10 to 13, about to embark on foreign language learning. Wolff had been the producer of a series a few years before, *Web of Language*, scripted mainly by Tony Penman, with Randolph Quirk as consultant. The new initiative, put together by Wolff, Penman, and Tony Adams (Cambridge Department of Education) had diversity as the overriding theme, with four of the programmes specifically focusing on regional variation. I was the consultant for the series and wrote two of the programmes as well as several pieces for the accompanying teachers' brochure. The second strand was aimed at primary schools: *Talk to Me*, a series of six 10-minute programmes produced by Paddy Beechely, broadcast in 1987, and focusing on children aged 6 to 7. The consultancy here involved much more than advising on content: a perspective from child language acquisition was required to ensure that the 'language about language' would be accessible to this age group. The fifth programme in the series, 'Hello! Who are you?', was entirely devoted to different accents, dialects, and languages. A further 10-part series aimed at 14–16-year-olds was aired in 1990, called *Language File*. Accents and dialects were the themes of two of the programmes, 'Whose English?' and 'Talking Proper'.

While all this was going on, a fresh initiative from Terry Doyle led to my submitting, in January 1992, a new version of *The Story of Language*. This time it attracted the interest of Alan Yentob – a promising sign. It was taken up by Peter Riding, executive producer for BBC Continuing Education, and a formal offer was made to BBC2 for five 50-minute programmes to go out mid-evening in Winter 1995 'celebrating the origins, diversity, power and creative potential of languages'. Accents and dialects figured largely in Programme 3. I was actually paid to be a consultant for that proposal – a first! But again, it never went ahead. I never learned why.

Four other factors were important in fostering the climate which led to *Voices*. One was the Open University. As early as 1973, the OU (launched in 1969) was presenting courses on *Language and Learning*, first under Asher Cashdan and later under John Chapman, and included components such as 'Language Variation and English' (Stringer 1973). By 1980, a whole raft of courses on language development, structure, and use was available and proving extremely

popular – as they still are. The BBC, of course, was the OU's partner in this enterprise, and several radio and television programmes were the outcome. It is difficult to estimate the impact of these on the evolution of cultural awareness about language (how many non-students watched those late night/early morning OU programmes?), but I don't think it can be understated. Certainly, when I made one of these television programmes myself (*Grammar Rules*, 1980), I was intrigued by the large number of people, none of them OU students, who told me they had seen it. And the constant reinforcement of the theme of language diversity, nationally and internationally, must have helped foster the interest in spoken language, especially in schools, for many of the students taking the English course were teachers – and an enthusiastic and committed cadre at that. (I was the course's external examiner for a few years, and saw at first hand the amazing level of commitment individuals were devoting to their English language study.)

The second major factor was the development of local radio. The vision behind this initiative, as expressed by the pioneer of local radio at the BBC, former war correspondent Frank Gillard, was 'to present on the air, and in many different forms and through a multitude of local voices, the running serial story of local life in all its aspects'.¹ Aware of the success of pirate radio stations around the UK, in 1967–8 the BBC chose eight locations for an initial experiment: Radio Leicester, Sheffield, Merseyside, Nottingham, Brighton, Stoke-on-Trent, Leeds, and Durham. It took a while to build audiences: it was difficult to publicize what was on offer, and the stations were available only on VHF at the time. But the experiment was a success, and in 1969 the BBC made local radio a permanent fixture and created 12 more stations. Then in 1973, the newly-formed Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) began licensing a fresh wave of commercial radio stations – over 80 within 15 years. Two years later, Radio Ulster began broadcasting, and three years after that Radio Scotland and Radio Wales. In all cases, the dominant impression the new station conveyed was the 'multitude of local voices', but they had limited resources and airtime, so that in-depth documentaries on such topics as regional dialect were not possible. The budget found for the *Voices* project provided an opportunity to exploit these local interests, at a nationwide level, for the first time. As Pat Loughrey, head of Nations and Regions at the time, has put it (email to me, 29 October 2012):

the vast Division seemed to me to be defined by their unique voices and experience. Yet in the obsession with daily journalism, chat and disc spinning, those wellsprings had been neglected or ignored in local programmes, in England especially. What they lacked was any shared, non-metropolitan platform for exploration or celebration.

A third element in the decade before *Voices* must not be forgotten: the approaching millennium. From the point of view of English language radio, this

was to be marked by a project at first called *A Thousand Years of Spoken English* on Radio 4. In the end it came to be called *The Routes of English*, broadcast as four series of six 30-minute programmes between 1999 and 2001, produced by Simon Elmes, and presented by Melvyn Bragg. I was the series consultant, and contributed to a couple of the programmes. Having such a well-known figure as the presenter gave the subject an unprecedented profile, and the recognition of the importance of regional speech was there from the beginning. In programme 1, Melvyn returned to Wigton, in Cumbria, to explore what had been happening to the local dialect there. The third series was entirely devoted to accents and dialects.

The fourth factor provided the immediate trigger for *Voices*: two projects that in their individual ways acted as trailblazers. The first was the *Video Nation* project for BBC 2, which ran between 1993 and 2000, co-founded and produced by Mandy Rose. The team gave camcorders to a group of people across the UK to record aspects of everyday life. These were broadcast both as short items and as longer programmes on a wide variety of topics. The group was selected 'to reflect the diversity of the UK' (as the programme description put it), so it was a linguistically rich mix of voices. The series didn't make any programmes specifically about language, but it was a theme constantly present in the recordings, and often the speakers would comment on matters relating to cultural and regional identity. Then in spring 2001 Mandy Rose moved from London to BBC Wales to run the newly formed New Media Department, bringing with her two key notions: ideas that would work across the UK, and ideas that lent themselves to public participation.

A bilingual environment is the perfect situation for generating ideas about language. The New Media Department was producing output in both English and Welsh, reflecting life across the whole of Wales, and linguistic issues – along with the associated issues of culture, class, community, and identity – were a regular talking point in the office. There are significant differences between the Welsh and Welsh English of South and North Wales, as well as many regional variations. In addition, the producers had to make decisions about the thorniest question of all: how formal should Welsh be on the BBC? Several relevant programmes were made. I was the consultant and contributor for a six-part television series, called *The Story of Welsh*, presented by Huw Edwards, and aired in 2003. The same year, radio came up with a four-part series called *The Way That You Say It*, on how English is spoken in Wales, written and produced by Steve Groves and presented by Siriol Jenkins.

Other dialect-orientated programmes were being made at the time, and these helped form the climate of language awareness that was growing in broadcasting as a whole in the early 2000s. An important series was *Back to Babel*, made by Michael Blythe, four 1-hour programmes for Infonation Media (at the time, the film-making division of the British Foreign Office) and broadcast on the Discovery Channel and worldwide. I was consultant and continuity contributor for that series, and had the same role two years later in *Blimey*, for BBC 4,

three 1-hour documentaries aired in January 2002 on how spoken English has changed since the Second World War. But these were one-offs. It was in Wales that there was an atmosphere of constant language-awareness, and it was perhaps inevitable that Mandy Rose's *Video Nation* experience would prompt her to think about how linguistic variation could be given a pan-UK interactive dimension. She writes (email to me, 19 August 2012): 'I remember on a train trip at that time considering the possibility of moving across an online map and hearing accents change as you travel'.

The second and more immediate trailblazer was an acclaimed Nations and Regions radio project in 2001, *A Sense of Place*, under executive editor Gloria Abramoff, which in effect acted as a testing-ground for the *Voices* project. Forty-three BBC radio stations, including Radios Cymru, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Foyle, broadcast a series of documentaries celebrating the distinctive qualities of communities around the UK. Collaboration also came from other channels, such as BBC Education, the *Where I Live* series, and BBC Nations' websites. When Pat Loughrey made the first formal announcement about *Voices*, it was presented as a follow-up project which would 'give people an opportunity to tell their stories' (BBC press release, 31 October 2002).

Mandy Rose had raised her ideas at one of BBC Wales' regular performance review meetings, and found they coalesced well with Pat Loughrey's thinking. Pat was the perfect person to take the project forward. He had a lifelong interest in regional speech, coming from an Irish-speaking background in Donegal. He had taught Irish, done some linguistics during doctoral work in Canada, and made several Radio Ulster programmes and packages on Hiberno English, before becoming Head of Programmes and then Controller in Northern Ireland. Mandy submitted an outline (one-page) proposal. The working title was *The UK Speaks*, with the gloss: 'BBC Nations and Regions celebrate the diverse languages, dialects, and accents of the UK'. The document makes interesting reading, in the light of subsequent events, so I quote its main points here. The operative word is 'audit':

In an ambitious multi-platform project involving our audience and a range of expert partners, BBC Nations and Regions will conduct an audit of the ways we talk across the UK in the early 21st century.

Potential partners mentioned were the National Sound Archive, the British Library, national and regional museums, the Welsh Language Board and its equivalents in Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as key university departments. Six project elements were specified:

- Programmes on local and national radio will take a variety of approaches to the accent, dialect and language in their area.
- A website featuring a multi-layered interactive map provides an engaging and educational interface for exploring the subject.

- Beneath the map the website provides a wealth of background information.
- Once launched, the website will be a growing, live space where users can add their own voices by phone around a number of themes.
- Radio phone-ins and Where I Live sites will provide a space for debate, about attitudes to accents, the meaning of particular words and expressions, etc.
- Open Centres, Community Studios, Buses will provide places to gather recordings.

The proposal concluded:

The ways we speak and the languages we speak in are a precious part of our identity. This project will celebrate the UK's diverse voices and examine some of the issues and tensions that differences of accent and language produce. The project will engage and offer insights across a range of platforms. Additionally, with partnership input, the project will have lasting value as social research; providing a unique audio survey which will capture aspects of regional speech threatened by social change and globalisation.

A period of development research for the proposal was given a green light. The first phase took place during the middle months of 2003, and I became involved at that point. Mandy had brought on board an executive producer in the New Media department, Faith Mowbray (see Elmes, this volume), and in a series of meetings during July and August we discussed how to realize these general ideas into a framework that would be robust from the point of view of sociolinguistics and dialectology. The BBC team was working with a very general notion of 'variation', conceived primarily in geographical terms, and had little sense of the way sociolinguists had identified such other variables as gender, age, occupation, socioeconomic class, and ethnicity, or the kinds of conversational activity that can influence a person's accent. My role at this point was simply to provide a sociolinguistic perspective for the project, identifying the main variables, to summarize the main dialect divisions in the UK, to draw up a bibliography, to identify what was already methodologically 'out there' (such as techniques of word mapping), and to suggest academic and professional contacts. For example, there was a possible point of connection with the UNESCO-supported *Voices of the World* project, based in Copenhagen, which was in development at that time – an ambitious multi-platform initiative that aimed to make recordings of every language in the world, and to make television documentaries on endangered languages.² And I felt an early contact with the Leeds Dialect Survey was critical to the success of the enterprise.

For practical reasons, Wales was chosen as a case study.³ A development producer, Rachel Muntz, was commissioned to explore the shape an online interactive project might take. The Australian Word Map proved to be a fruitful model. A great deal of in-house discussion took place with radio and television colleagues in BBC Wales. There was a meeting with the National

Sound Archive, which was itself undertaking a map-based web project on the accents and dialects of England, part of a plan to digitize selected British Library assets. A think-tank meeting was convened with potential partners, using contacts in Wales to obtain initial reactions, including the curator of audio-visual archives at St Fagans Museum of the National Library of Wales, the chair and head of education of the Welsh Language Board, and linguists from Swansea (Penhallurick, this volume) and Cardiff. The response was enthusiastic, and Mandy recalls the animated character of the discussion, as people talked about their words for things – their ‘linguistic biographies’, as she put it. It was clear at that meeting that the BBC could do something really valuable if it was able to conduct some fresh research drawing on the network of Nations and Regions.

In the summer of 2003 Mandy and Faith had their first meeting with Clive Upton, who introduced them to the SuRE interview methodology (Elmes, Upton, this volume). This was an important factor in ensuring the acceptance of the project by the BBC. Mandy presented work-in-progress twice to the Nations and Regions management team during 2003, and at the second meeting they were able to describe the SuRE approach, which impressed everyone. The connection with Leeds offered not only expertise, but also legacy (of which this book is an illustration). At that meeting, Pat Loughrey made the critically important decision to commit journalists’ time from across the network to conduct the interviews. The next step was to interest other departments. Mandy had not included any proposals for network radio or television involvement in her early proposals, as there was no guarantee that a project which originated in one division of the BBC (Nations and Regions) would appeal to another. However, the promise of high-quality survey recordings, supported by academic expertise, being made available for radio and television programmes proved attractive. In the autumn of 2003, there was a positive response at an initial meeting with Radio 4, and interest from other channels followed.

I had several meetings with the team during 2004, as the project transformed from *The UK Speaks* into *Voices*, and some of the in-house developments during that year are summarized by Elmes, whose primary role was to give a practical realization (‘a bespoke BBC version’, as he puts it) to the conceptual and methodological apparatus developed by the academics. Interview guidelines were sent out to the local radio journalists, who came together for a ‘Big Day’ in October 2004, during which ideas were shared and a large number of practical questions dealt with. The project launched in January 2005, with excellent coverage, and a second ‘Big Day’ was held in Birmingham in February 2005, to assess the impact of the launch and to plan ahead for the major event, the ‘Voices Week’, scheduled for Week 34, 22–26 August. As Pat Loughrey put it, ‘What was really unique in *Voices* was the involvement of all of England’ and finding ‘a budget big enough to do this work to the highest standards across the whole UK – no exceptions’ (email to me, 29 October 2012). Mick Ord, a respected local radio manager, was a critical figure in making all this happen, as was Andy Griffie, the Controller of English Regions at the time.

The Birmingham meeting was a truly impressive occasion, with the entire *Voices* team present as well as representatives from over 40 local radio stations around the country. In a briefing document, Mick Ord and Faith Mowbray outlined the essential differences between the launch material (January 2005) and the output planned for Voices Week. They felt they had only scratched the surface of the linguistic theme in January, and that the later schedule would enable local and national stations to 'dig deeper'. The aim was to include a broader and more diverse range of people in the interview groups, noting that diversity included age, sex, disability, and ethnicity, and not simply regional background. A much wider range of subject-matter was identified, including swearing, young people's language, slang, idioms, the role of standard English, politically incorrect language, the influence of the media upon language, the role of education in fostering language attitudes, body language, community languages other than English, bilingualism, speech disorders, artificial languages (such as Klingon), and sign language of the deaf. Clearly *Voices* was developing into a project 'about language', and not just 'about dialect'. I have never experienced another occasion like this one, where the interaction between so many general concepts of language and the needs and practicalities of daily broadcasting has been explored in such depth. Far more came out of the brainstorming than could ever have been used in a single broadcasting week, but this gave the programme-makers a huge amount of choice in selecting topics that would suit their audiences.

For many of the local journalists, this was the first time they had had an opportunity to discuss linguistic issues 'across the table'. Some of the points were contentious, and it was both informative and reassuring for them to see that the same issues were being encountered throughout the network. For example, there was considerable discussion of how to handle strong language. When local people are recorded in naturalistic situations, talking about everyday topics on which they have real knowledge and often strong opinions, there are risks. They are likely to swear, use abusive names, make racial comments, express extreme views, and generally talk in an unconstrained way which, if broadcast, would offend some listeners or viewers. The BBC of course has criteria which it tries to follow (notions of a 'watershed', for example), but with *Voices*, producers and presenters would be breaking new ground, in that the focus was on the speech itself and only indirectly on the content. They were used to making editorial judgements about allowing the use of swearing in literary contexts, where a usage was justified – for example by a character in a play; but there was uncertainty about what audience reaction would be to conversations in which swear-words might be heard as an apparently indispensable feature. There was a general feeling that great caution would be necessary in selecting material from the recorded interviews.

The meeting, along with the preliminary and follow-up briefing documents, was also extremely informative in drawing attention to the range of content covered by the innocent-sounding terms *dialect* and *accent*. For many of the

journalists, there was an expectation that the aim of the interviews was to collect speech samples of a kind that is not normally heard on radio or television – the broader accents and nonstandard dialects of the population. It was thus important to emphasize that the speech varieties normally heard in broadcasting are just as important a part of the mix that constitutes British ‘voices’ as are working-class accents. Don’t forget the ‘toff voices’, said one of the guidelines. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking that there are people who have ‘no accent’, said another. Expect contradictory results in surveys, said a third. Indeed, some intriguing results had already been raised by the national survey of voices that had been carried out in the first stage of the project. Some results were clear-cut:

I like hearing a range of accents. (78% agree, 6% disagree, 16% undecided)

I hear a wider variety of accents on BBC television and radio nowadays than I did before. (76% agree, 8% disagree, 17% neither agree nor disagree)

To what extent does your accent change depending on who you are with? (19% never, 81% at least occasionally, 5% all the time)

Some showed opinion evenly divided:

Regional accents are less distinct than they used to be. (39% agree, 27% disagree, 24% think neither)

Men tend to have stronger accents than women. (28% agree, 38% disagree, 34% neither disagree or agree)

But there were also some puzzling results. In a survey of celebrity voices, Sean Connery came top of the ‘most pleasant’ poll and Ian Paisley came top of the ‘least pleasant’ poll; on the other hand, Billy Connolly and the Queen were both in the top ten of each poll! The fact that the Queen’s voice generated ambivalence was, to my mind, the most significant result of the entire survey, and one that would have been inconceivable fifty years ago.

Voices Week, in August 2005, did indeed resemble a ‘national obsession’, as Simon Elmes describes it. For my part, I have never been on so many radio programmes in a single day. During the afternoon of 17 August, for example, interviews with local radio stations were coming in at 10-minute intervals, from all over the country, and I know other members of the *Voices* team were similarly engaged. But the interest both preceded and followed the official Week. I was involved as consultant for two television programmes, both of which impressed me greatly with the originality of their approach. *The Word On The Street* (29 July 2005, BBC2) explored accent change within four generations of a Leicestershire family – the first time I had had the opportunity of observing such a perspective. And *The Way We Say It* (2005, BBC Wales, producer Catrin Mair Thomas) took

me, as co-presenter, to parts of Wales I had never visited before, to meet people who seriously broadened my notion of what counted as a Welsh accent. I had known, for example, that there were 'dialect islands' along the North Wales coast reflecting the incomer history of that region. On our recording visit, I met some of these people, including some who had lived all their lives in the area, and, indeed, they had accents that were virtually indistinguishable from those heard in nearby Cheshire and Lancashire. What I was not expecting was to hear them confidently and proudly affirm that they spoke with a 'Welsh accent'. Several of the chapters in this book draw attention to the insights about regional identity, methodology, and ideology brought to light by the *Voices* data, both in the recorded interviews and in the website forum.

The *Voices* project has been repeatedly described using synchronic metaphors – as an audit, or snapshot, or sound-portrait of the language in Britain at a particular point in time – 2005. But it needs a diachronic perspective to really prove its worth. During the project, the point was regularly made that this was a task that only the BBC could carry out to the level of professionalism in interview technique and acoustic quality that such a project requires. The thought that this could be something the BBC might take on board on a regular basis, finances permitting, was mentioned in early discussions; and in a speech at a celebratory retrospective in Broadcasting House in November 2005, having sounded out a few people beforehand as to the ideal distance between audits, I introduced the thought again. The consensus among the senior managers I talked to at the time was that we need such a survey at least once in a generation. However, that is around 30 years, which is a long time for a language that is developing so rapidly. Bearing in mind the way accents, and attitudes to accents, have changed so dramatically since 1980, a shorter time-period suggests itself. There seems to be no risk of a diminution of interest on the part of the listening and viewing public: programmes involving accents and dialects continue to generate huge audience reaction whenever they are aired. And there is a strong argument that *Voices 2*, whenever it might be held, would benefit from being sufficiently close to *Voices 1* to enable listeners and viewers to retain some sense of auditory identity with those who took part in it. My feeling is that 15 years is an ideal gap, which would locate *Voices 2* in 2020 – or perhaps 2022, the hundredth anniversary of daily broadcasting on the BBC.

Notes

- 1 See the historical summary at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/resources/in-depth/local_radio.shtml>.
- 2 For some of the output of this project, see <http://www.final-cut.dk/films2.php?mit_indhold_id=3&films_id=10>.
- 3 I am grateful to Mandy Rose and Pat Loughrey for several of the details in the next two paragraphs.

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