

Some Responses to
The Liza Doolittle Syndrome

I much enjoyed *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome*, and hope that you can pass on to the author a few suggestions for a second edition.

First: one general remark, it strikes me that much of what MW blames on “American journalism” is really to be attributed to American films and American television. These, surely, are the vectors to the U.K. He does not watch them—and I cannot blame him.

Page 27: MW doesn’t elaborate here on the “fear of posh”. Eventually the reader reaches page 44 and discovers that there is also a “striving for posh”. Why not combine the two in a “love-hate” chapter, or at least put one after another in two chapters?

Page 33: I understand that the book is something of a miscellany, but it strikes me that it is misleading to treat the spelling-pronunciations of common nouns and proper nouns together. I have no objection to MW’s remarks on common nouns, but I do feel that the same motivations are not always (or even usually) present in the spelling-pronunciation of proper nouns. I picked hops in Kent in 1968 with 20 Cambridge undergraduates (wages were 5/- an hour for the men, 3/6 for the women). The village was Mereworth, and on comparing notes, we found that we had all arrived on the bus and asked direction to “Meerwuth”. The locals pronounce it “Merrywuth”. Please don’t call us Liza Doolittles! We had all made an honest attempt at pronouncing the name of an obscure village that was as unknown to us as to the BBC news. I therefore feel that there may be a more innocent explanation for the pronunciation of many of the names listed in parallel columns on page 34 than MW is willing to allow.

As for the last paragraph on that page, I feel that there is also a recognition of various gradations of absurdity at work here. It is, for instance, easier even for an infidel to admit that the Christian gospels may be more or less historical than that the *Book of Mormon* has any truth to it at all—the rules of evidence for so recent a promulgation are simply so very much more stringent. There are British family names, such as Leveson-Gower, that one almost has to belong to the family to pronounce, i.e one’s own ordinary way of speaking has to have enough of an Edwardian drawl to it that the surname (correctly pronounced) does not stick out from its matrix like a sore

Comments on *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome*

thumb. This is also true of many of those long, philologically-correct Irish names favored for their children by the Anglo-Irish who studied Irish in the 1920's. Surely there is nothing more "British" (in the best sense) than a brave attempt to incorporate foreign terms into an English sentence with the maximum amount of accuracy and the minimum of disruption? MW writes elsewhere of the importance of syntax: no name is an island!

MW also ignores the diachronic shifts in pronunciation. Bishop Blomfield wrote an instructional limerick about Cirencester 175 years ago, rhyming it with "solicitor" and "visitor". Today, his verses would require a footnote. And what of all those Scottish names on the pattern of Menzies? For correct pronunciation, one must know both when and where a Menzies lived. Let us also remember that many families consider the pronunciation favored by their most eminent exemplar to be an aberration. Is it "Haklit" or "Hakelwhit"? The Pepys[-Cockerell] family insists that Samuel Pepys was alone in pronouncing the name "Peeps". A later diarist, Sir Edmund Backhouse, called himself "Bacchus" but his brother Roger (First Sea Lord) and all other members of the family insisted on the spelling-pronunciation. Incidentally, the most celebrated member of the Featherstonehaugh family (mentioned by MW in this context), the 19th-C. geologist, pronounced his surname according to spelling. If one wishes to be understood, does one dare refer to the 17th-century poets Cowley and Carew as "Coolie" and "Carey"? In my experience that traditional (MW says "received") pronunciation, known to all English dons as late as the 1960's, is now extinct. "Cowper" as "Cooper" hangs on—but barely. It's been years since I heard "Purchas" of the *Pilgrimages* referred to (correctly) as "Purkis".

The real target here, I feel, should be cases of avowed mockery of the Upper Crust, or revisionary ventures from the social-climbing proletariat. Wasn't there a Powell in the British cabinet five or ten years ago who was constant to his working-class origins, pronouncing his surname as spelt, while his *arriviste* wife, just ahead of him in the receiving line, was introducing herself as "Pole"? Indeed, much of this proper-name spelling-pronunciation material could profitably go in the anti-posh section of my proposed "love-hate" chapter—with cross-reference, of course.

A final anecdote on pronunciation: Nicolas Barker was once telling me about the Open University in Milton Keynes. "It's spelt 'Kainz'," he said, "but pronounced 'Keenz'." I trust that this splendid refutation of the "naively fundamentalist belief that words are made of letters" etc. will delight MW.

Comments on *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome*

Page 36: Does MW know of the charming recent book by Gian Luigi Beccaria on False Latinisms, Latin derivatives, and Latin malaprops amongst the Italian peasantry, largely of liturgical origin (from the days of the Latin mass)? The title says it all: *Sicuterat: il latino di chi non lo sa*—or, “Sicut erat: the Latin of people who don’t know the language”. Did you know that Lord Curzon, on first hearing of the cinema, pronounced it “Kaineemah”?

Page 39: I feel that the quotation from Ingrid Tieken-Book [*sic*, it’s really “Boon”] van Ostade is a little unfair. She is an admirable scholar but not a native speaker of English. Instead of excoriating her, I have always been filled with gratitude that she does not insist on publishing on interesting English subjects in Dutch. And does “to beg the question” really mean, as MW states, “to evade the question”? I suspect that it has been years since he last read his Aristotle. The Latin term is *Petitio principii*, or “assuming the initial point”. To beg the question is *not* to evade the question, but to offer a self-referential proof, i.e. no proof at all. At its most elementary, this takes the form of restating the claim in different words.

Page 40: “Grumble” in “My stomach’s grumbling” is, I suspect, a portmanteau word derived from “growl” and “rumble”.

Page 43: Is it really fair to blame America for “Ye Olde”? It does persist here, it is true, but is a thing of the past. It has no resonance for the modern American entrepreneur, who is rarely of British descent nowadays. I cannot think of an American use of “Merrie England” that antedates “Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese”, a staunchly *British* institution.

Page 45: “Bathroom” is indeed an American invention, but let us not forget that “lavatory” is no less a euphemism.

Page 49: Is “iconic” really just “eye-catching”? I have always seen it used in contexts that suggest “resonantly and influentially *recognisable and symbolic*”. An “iconic” object (e.g. Andy Warhol’s “Marilyn Monroe”) is a point of reference (alas!) to all. One may catch the eye—and then lose it! (You might perhaps recall David McCord’s *Epitaph on a Waiter*: “By and by, God caught his eye”).

Page 56: *Messiah*, alas, is the correct aboriginal Handelian title. No definite article has been shorn away by modern barbarians! MW needn’t abandon his point, but he ought to take advance precautions against musical pedantry. I advise that he should suggest, in a footnote, that inasmuch as *Messiah* has been popularly known for decades (if not centuries) as *The*

Comments on *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome*

Messiah, there are two possible explanations for the recent disappearance of the definite article. Either the sub-editor possessed arcane knowledge commanded by only a few elderly musicologists, or the writer was streamlining the title to accord with *Crystal Palace*.

Page 64: I do feel that MW's remarks on "Rebecca" vs "Rebekah" are unnecessarily (almost quaintly) nasty. Why not find out whether she has indeed "upgraded"? (The web must be full of every private detail of her life by now.) If she *has* "upgraded", fire away! If not, omit your footnote and allow her to be the "Rebekah" she really is. After all, many Jews have both a "Gentile" and a Jewish first name, e.g. "Mortimer" and "Mordecai". The former are usually British aristocratic surnames with identical initial letters, e.g. Sydney, Gordon, Elliott, or Clifford. It's an irresistible lure! As the younger brother of a peer once said to me of the "gentile" version, "Isn't it odd, how every 'Earl' or 'Duke' in the United States is a barkeeper or a taxi-driver?" No adverse reflection intended on your sometime collaborator!

yours sincerely,

Ian Jackson, author (as Jan Cosinka) of a similar book on the peculiar English of a leading Romance philologist, *Teach yourself Malkielese*.

* * *

I was slightly disappointed in the Liza booklet, and wanted more grist in his mill.

The whole point of Shaw's play is that Higgins believes he can change Liza totally merely by altering her *speech*. The booklet's examples are mostly drawn (not very systematically, and in some cases not very plausibly) from *written* English.

Exceptions are 16, 17 and 18 which point up oddities in spoken English, of the kind that the pre-Higgins Eliza might have uttered.

I see that he first drafted it in 2009—hence the odd list of "high achievers", Jacqui Smith *et al.* (p. 7)—and although there is a brief mention of Cameron and his pals at the end of this 2012 publication he has surely missed a golden opportunity to choose new examples, as there is now a whole group of posh-talking public school lads in government who illustrate LDS far more clearly than poor old Jacqui Smith ever did.

Comments on *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome*

He might then have noted, in passing, that Cameron certainly suffers from 17, in that he goes ridin' and hackin' with his horsey friends. Quite a lot of highly-educated and high-achieving people in horse racin' don't pronounce their "g's" in their "ings".

The sideswipes at Comprehensive Education are out-of-date too. Many such schools—a rapidly increasing number—are now called "Academies", and have a distinctive new jargon all of their own.

Good points about the inanities of "spell check", and about the bogus matiness of business correspondence ("your bill" etc.), but up-to-date examples of the corrosive new telegraphese of blogging and twittering would have been useful. Apparently twice as many people now read Stephen Fry's daily twitter as read *The Guardian*, which boggles the mind in all sorts of ways.

John Pick

* * *

Thanks for Michael Wallerstein's book. I'm enjoying it, even while thinking that he could be spending his time better than collecting instances of bad usage, since of these there is no end. While such collections have the merit of amusing and even inspiring readers like me, who are in his corner already, they have little or no effect on the linguistic offenders, who, as he himself notes, will see nothing wrong with the examples he offers.

I'm reminded of the classic joke: Mother to son: "there are two words that I wish you'd stop using; one is 'lousy' and the other is 'cool'." "OK Mom, what are they?"

So the book falls for me into the category of preaching to the choir. Since I'm a member of the choir, I gladly listen to the sermon, but wish the preacher were instead addressing his sermon somehow to the sinners, who need it more. But for a sermon to the choir, it's well done, and as I said at the outset, I'm enjoying it.

With all best wishes,

Mark Halpern (author of *Language and Human Nature*)

Comments on *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome*

Michael Wallerstein replies

I found all the comments interesting and helpful and am delighted that anyone at all should be reading my little book.

Obviously, Ian Jackson's comments are of greatest use and need incorporating into any second edition. Of course, I'm aware of diachronic changes in pronunciation, lexis, syntax, intonation—see *Dear Mr Howard*. *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome* is deliberately popular in tone.

I feel all these comments somewhat miss the main object of the book—which is not really about “bad usage” as Mark Halpern seems to think. And there is only one mention of comprehensive education (making the same remark as John Pick, that the Eton-educated are no better). The main point is stated in the Introduction: that the LDS-ers are stolidly and smugly sure that THEY ARE RIGHT. I have several times had my English “corrected” by them—including, once, by the local greengrocer! (He told me to say “still” for “yet” in “while there's yet time”.)

They are imperious and intolerant of any deviation from THEIR English—coming from a person of better education or a dialect speaker.

The point of the book is to show them up—both themselves and their “posh” imitators.

* * *

We are unable to give a reliable report of Mrs Brooks's birth certificate or whether she has been baptised. Perhaps a reader could supply information. According to *Wikipedia*

Brooks was born **Rebekah Mary Wade** in Warrington, Lancashire to a father variously described as a tugboat deckhand and gardener. She grew up in Daresbury, and decided she wanted to be a journalist from the age of fourteen. She attended Appleton Hall High School—a state comprehensive school that had previously been a grammar school—in Appleton, near Warrington.

—*Ed.* (syntax of second quoted sentence sic)

to return to home page click on www.edgewaysbooks.com