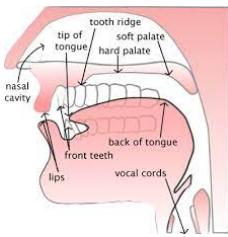


A finicky tongue:



My very first 'date' was in the summer of 1968 with a nineteen-year-old teachers' college student named Lesley. She was from Toronto but had a summer job as a chambermaid at the Algonquin Hotel in St. Andrews, New Brunswick. I was briefly working there along with several other boys from my native village. Most were on the dishwashing crew but I operated the service elevator.

We met on the elevator where I routinely transported her laundry cart between floors. Soon after, we joined our roommates (mine was a fellow villager working as a busboy) in a couple of double dates. I was not quite smitten but flattered that she seemed interested in me. I was two years her junior and still in high school. At the time I assumed that any person of her background had to be both sophisticated and highly intelligent.

In one of the dates, we left the other pair in a dormitory room and took a long walk in the dark.

Perhaps it was when I was telling her how '*Brave New World*' led me to other novels by Aldous Huxley that she suddenly said:

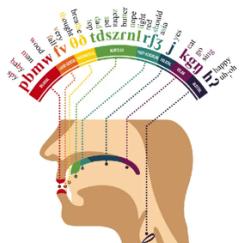
"You don't seem to have the New Brunswick accent. Except maybe when you're talking with your friends."

Lesley had earlier said that she saw an academic future for me. As one struggling with self-confidence—I was deeply grateful for her encouragement. Yet whether intended as a compliment or not—it was her remark about my accent that I took most to heart...



Like the ninety-seven pound weakling secretly lifting weights—for the previous two years I had been hungrily reading for ideas—even writing out vocabulary lists... A meeting of minds with an Ontario college student (however briefly) seemed evidence of a burgeoning strength...

As for my accent: I had not deliberately tried to alter it. I was, however, venturing to use new vocabulary even at the risk of the scorn of village yokels... I wondered whether a change in my accent could be a bonus complement of self-study. If local accents were identified with narrower minds—whether rightly or wrongly—I was eager to shed all traces of mine...



From early on, I sensed that people were judged by how they spoke... On childhood visits to my maternal grandparents' farm in Carleton County, New Brunswick, the local accent could make me as queasy as the home cooking... Perhaps an embryonic language snobbery had already taken root.

My older male cousins from “up home” (my mother’s expression) always seemed to have cigarettes wagging from their mouths while they spoke through their noses. Elvis pompadours, bad teeth, cowboy comics and country music seemed to go along with their country accent...

I would often come back to my home village with anecdotes about the colourful English of those rural cousins... A favourite example was the cardboard sign tied to the bumper (along with tin cans) of the nuptials' car outside the country church when a female cousin got married. The sign read: '*Tommy ain't a cowboy but he's aridin' tonite!*'

Repeating that line got me laughs long before I knew exactly what the bridegroom could have been “*aridin*”...

At home, my mother frowned upon ‘ain’ts’ and final G-dropping. Yet when excited or when in the farm kitchens of our kin, even she slipped into the Carleton County dialect... I can never forget the generosity and warmth I took for granted in those visits. Yet I can neither deny that my pointy little ears prickled in what I called a ‘hillbilly’ accent...

Before my world extended beyond a 50-mile radius, those pointy little ears took note of other accents besides those of rural Carleton County. To use a couple of adjectives I had yet to acquire: Yankee accents sounded abrasive while British accents, snooty. Some accents were comical—like that of the Newfies or French politicians mangling English (I had yet to grasp the hypocrisy of

English speakers' ignorance of French). Then there were the "tough-enders" in my home village whose speech seemed as rough as their manners...

Up until my early-teens, I assumed that most folk in my native village spoke like 'average' Canadians. Locals did not speak with quite the crispness of CBC announcers. Yet their accents didn't seem different from those of characters on American TV series apart from the casts of '*The Real McCoys*' or '*The Beverly Hillbillies*'...



It would be several years before I found out that every native speaker of English has some regional accent and that from a linguistic perspective, there is no universal standard. Yet at seventeen, I still assumed that having an accent meant that one "speaks funny". I wondered whether to some outsiders—the New Brunswick accent could sound as peculiar as that of Newfoundland. It was disturbing to think that the way I spoke could get in the way of being a credible speaker...

So while the seventeen-year-old was relieved in hearing from the nineteen-year-old from Toronto that he didn't have much of a New Brunswick accent—he was still troubled by the qualifier: "*Except maybe when you're with your friends.*"

Thereafter, I began to more closely monitor my own speaking. I was determined to shed every trace of the mumbling, sighing and nasal droning... While still steadfast in the mutual loyalty of my few close friends—lazy grammar like: "*Where youse guys goin?*" issuing from their mouths (or noses) became ever more secretly irritating...

Much more irritating was the stronger versions of the local accent—such as those of the young men who drove pulp trucks... They wore green uniforms and smoked hand-rolled 'makins'. They were suspicious of users of "big words" but seemed to have as many verbs for driving fast as the Inuit have for snow (e.g.: *bootin' 'er*; *humsuckin' 'er*; *pisscuttin' 'er*). Some of their expressions would have been gems for linguistic research (e.g. "*My jeezley tank is pertineer empty!*" or "*Thas clear crazy!*")

Yet their talk, even if only overheard from a neighbouring booth in the village diner— pinged my seventeen-year-old heart like the whine of chainsaws in the grey of November...

At that age, I could not even ignore the nasality in the voices of teen girls who would otherwise have been appealing. Those with the stronger accents could just as well have had mouthfuls of rotten teeth...

Even the tri-syllabic name of the village itself—*mə 'kædəm*—could trigger a trill of nausea when enounced in the local accent. It sounded almost like a jeer: '*Who da ya think yoo are, smart ass?*'

That taunt was not to be so easily dismissed. I assumed that those whose expressions were so crude had to be narrow-minded... Yet I was blind to such heroics as truck-tire changing at -30°. I assumed that the local vocabulary was impoverished apart from names of church denominations, freshwater fish and those verbs for going fast. Yet I knew almost nothing of the lore—or the vocabulary—of the northern woods that many local lads were absorbing. A more nuanced grasp of irony was still years away...

Nevertheless, by my final year in the village, the local accent—once merely dreary—became threatening. However perversely, it seemed that by letting down my guard—speaking like the locals—I could be swallowed up and suffocated...

Mercifully, at the age of eighteen, I got away to college. There I found breathing space and a polyglossia of voices with new ideas...

'fʌkɪŋ 'dʒi:zəs!

There are, apparently, experts in the phonology of North American English who can identify the region of origin of any native speaker. Even a distant wayfaring from one's place of origin; even an attempt to disguise one's voice—cannot erase all traces of a regional accent.

Were '*Holy ole cross-eyed jeezus!*' to erupt from my throat upon my being jabbed by a pin, the repertoire of spontaneously elicited curses in native New Brunswickese would still be paltry. I do know that even if I were to try—I could not mimic a 'good ole buddy' accent well enough to dine out on it...

Innumerable folks do dine out on their accents. Many of these folks acquire English as a second language from immigration in early childhood yet by choice retain the accents of their first languages. Their ethnic accent automatically signals a unique identity and splices up the blandness of standard inflections... Native speakers who speak a non-standard regional accent often similarly avail themselves of that major asset. From a Newfie brogue to a London 'Received Pronunciation'—a nimbly managed regional accent can charm or intimidate—as situations require. Those of us whose accents are fixed in the sterile tones of the mainstream (the global language of commerce?) can only be envious...

A friend and former colleague who lived most of his life distant from his native Kentucky—geographically, culturally and politically—proudly calls himself a "hillbilly". Especially with Canadian listeners, he loves to lay on his 'good ole boy' accent. He unfailingly charms...

Indeed, to my ear, accents of the American south sound mellifluous—even from the mouths of repugnant crackers... When employed with intelligence and grace (one might think of the historian Shelby Foote, narrating Civil War anecdotes in his Mississippi drawl) the effect can be spellbinding...

My Kentucky-born friend and I have joked about the commonalities of our respective boyhood territories. In growing up, we both found ourselves at odds with ole timey religion, country music and conservative ‘values’... Outside of Acadia, the Canadian Maritimes—like southern Appalachia—retains a dominant Scots-English-Irish population. There is considerable evidence that rural Maritimers are Appalachian folks’ hillbilly cousins in winter jackets...

Yet with no disrespect to my American friend, I am grateful that the very DNA of Canadians—including that of Maritimers—has essential differences with that of Americans. Our core stuff is especially distinct from that of southern Americans... Even before the first attempts to chop through ice for full immersion baptisms, our ancestors grasped that they were probably not chosen people in a Promised Land...

Yet as deeply as I cherish such differences—I still wonder why the English accent of my native province sounds so drab compared with English spoken in the American south....

Perhaps there is an analogy in my response to bluegrass music as opposed to the old time New Brunswick fiddle ensembles. Although I had previously despised bluegrass (along with all country music), in my mid-twenties—at a safe distance from its roots—I discovered its joys...

Sometime thereafter, I wondered whether I might train my ears to similarly appreciate traditional New Brunswick fiddling. Yet through an entire evening listening to jigs, reels and hornpipes—no epiphany could be coaxed forth. Indeed, in the sawing screech of Don Messer’s fiddle in ‘*Maple Sugar*’—I could almost smell the baked beans that left me queasy on Saturday nights of childhood ...

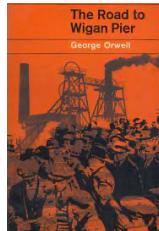
So similarly, my patronizing effort to appreciate the colourful idioms and unique intonations of New Brunswick English would surely fail. It was an accent engendered not in bluegrass meadows or foggy mountain hollows of the south but in the glacial-scraped soil of the north woods... In my ear, the New Brunswick accent compared with that of Kentucky—will always sound like Don Messer’s fiddle compared with the banjo of Earl Scruggs...



I rarely now hear that old accent of my native soil. It is probably disappearing. The few boyhood friends with whom I keep in touch in occasional phone calls mostly now speak in the homogenized tones of a lifetime’s immersion in global English...

Still, once in a while I perk up to particular voices on TV news reports. Recently there was a farmer from Woodstock, New Brunswick speaking of a potato blight that led to a collapse of prices: “*They’re sumpin’ awful this year—no two ways about it!*”

His nose-droned syllables sounded bleak—but not quite as bleak as the whine of chainsaws. Having left the province before the more efficient tree harvesters and skidders set to the denuding of the provincial forests—the sound of these machines on a winter day is fortunately not registered in my neural store of gloom-triggering sounds...



Finally, to revisit the image of a finicky boy turning up his nose to a supper dished in the farm kitchen:

“*Yer not fussy about much, are ya?*” my grandmother would sigh, scratching under a sleeve of her mother hubbard dress...

Perhaps I would have had more of an appetite were it not for the smells from the adjoining shed: mouldy potatoes, kindling and manure... Then there was the faint odour of sweat from work clothes hung up beside the wood stove...

Such memories remind me of George Orwell’s reflections on his childhood aversion to foul smells:

In a passage in ‘*Road to Wigan Pier*’ (1937) Orwell relates a memory of being squeezed in a railway carriage among “navvies and pigmen” who are passing around a bottle of beer:

‘I cannot describe the horror I felt as that bottle worked his way toward me. If I drank after all those lower-class male mouths, I felt certain I should vomit. On the other hand, if they offered it to me I dared not refuse for fear of offending....’

He reflects that his fear of ‘lower class’ germs and dirt rubbing off on him revealed a deeper anxiety. That was what he described as his family’s “genteel poverty.” By his family’s barely clinging to the rung of the lower-middle class, Orwell believed that in his childhood, he was infected with an unnamed fear: that of slipping into the next lower rung. That lower rung was the working class ...

The rigid class structure of England in the 1930s is as alien to my experience as growing up amid the caste system of India. Still, when I think of turning up my nose in my relatives’ farm kitchens—I deeply identify with Orwell’s descriptions.... The felt dreariness—whether in reaction to the food, the smells or the accents—reflected a dread similar to that described by Orwell. In my case, it was a fear of being pulled ‘down’ and trapped in my rural cousins’ world.

Meanwhile, that attitude rightly amused my rural relatives: “*So ya can’t wait to git back to yer big city of Makadumb, eh?*” they would tease.

Of course, many take great pride in rural origins. I think again of my Kentucky ‘hillbilly’ friend who also happens to be a graduate of Georgetown University... This makes the petty snobbery of a New Brunswick village boy a half century ago all the more risible...

As for Orwell in the 1930s—he was determined to overcome his childhood squeamishness—and overcome it, he did. He “went native” among the working poor of northern England and chronicled his experiences in his journals—bequeathing the world his timeless political insight.

In concluding his anecdote about fearing to drink from a bottle after a “lower class male mouth”, he writes: ‘*Nowadays, thank god, I have no feelings of that kind...*’

A half-century on, I trust that I can claim the same...

-2012, January
