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Late Modern newspapers as a mirror of linguistic (in)stability and change

Massimo Sturiale

Università degli Studi di Catania

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to highlight the role of nineteenth-century British and American newspapers in promoting and reinforcing a standard pronunciation ideology, one already established in England in the eighteenth century with the need for, in Swift's words, "correcting, improving and ascertaining the English tongue" (Swift 1712) and, as a consequence, reducing linguistic variation and instability. In Britain, the fear of 'linguistic instability' had led to the social stigmatisation and marginalisation of certain, mainly 'provincial', accents, and the consolidation of a linguistic, yet stereotypical, North-South divide (cf. Beal 2009, 2010, 2012 and 2014). In the United States, as a result of the much-acclaimed linguistic independence from Britain, the prescriptivist debate was supported by linguistic patriotism (Sturiale 2012). The focus of my investigation is on external factors in linguistic (in)stability and language change. The data adduced here were drawn from a corpus of more than three hundred nineteenth-century "letters to the editor" and newspaper articles dealing with issues of pronunciation, published both in Britain and the US.

Keywords: newspapers, pronunciation, attitudes, changes, Americanisms, Briticisms.

1. Introduction

The discussion presented in this paper is part of a larger research project on the role and influence of nineteenth-century British and American newspapers on accent attitudes which foregrounded the standard language ideology and its subsequent metalanguage (see, among others, Agha 2003, Lippi-Green 1997, Milroy – Milroy 2012, Milroy 2000, Milroy 2001 and Mugglestone 2003).

As I have argued elsewhere (Sturiale 2014, 2016a and 2016b), in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain the press did help to promote and reinforce the standard language ideology which characterised the onset of the Late Modern period and, in the Milroys' words (2012: 24ff.), gave rise to "the complaint tradition". In fact, as Beal has maintained:

The second half of the eighteenth century was, indeed, the period when the standardisation of English pronunciation reached the codification stage, as variants became prescribed or proscribed and clear guidelines for the attainment of 'correct' pronunciation appeared in the form of pronouncing dictionaries. (Beal 2010: 36)

So, if on the one hand eighteenth-century pronouncing dictionaries codified the standard form of English pronunciation, on the other hand nineteenth-century newspapers contributed to the "acceptance" stage (cf. Haugen 1966).

Furthermore, this investigation also aims to fill the gap identified by Görlach in 1999 when he commented on attitudes towards regional and social variations. He claimed that:

There is an insufficiency of reliable data on what people thought about linguistic correctness and prestige (and how such opinions related to the same person's actual usage); anecdotal evidence comes from private letters and similar documents and from the prescriptive statements in grammar books and advice in books on etiquette. Attitudes can also be reconstructed from novels and plays, although these data need to be interpreted with particular caution. The authors' main objective, then as now, is unlikely to be the provision of a realistic account; rather, they tend to employ selected sociolinguistic features to characterize their protagonists in conversation or to make them comment on others' speech forms. (Görlach 1999: 26)

In the following sections it will be shown that throughout the nineteenth century, newspapers – whose readers felt they were permitted or even entitled to have their say – made an outstanding contribution to the reinforcement of 'false myths' which in the long run were to characterise prescriptive attitudes more on a social scale rather than on a linguistic scale (see, among others, Curzan 2014 and Percy 2012). Moreover, whereas in Britain the fear of 'linguistic instability' led to the social stigmatisation and marginalisation of certain, mainly 'provincial', accents, and the consolidation of a linguistic, yet stereotypical, North-South divide (cf. Beal 2009, 2010, 2012

and 2014. See also Crystal 2017), in the United States, as a result of much-acclaimed linguistic independence from Britain, the prescriptivist debate was supported by linguistic patriotism (Sturiale 2012). Therefore, if in Britain orthoepists, journalists and readers were busy condemning “vulgar English pronunciation” (*Cornwall Royal Gazette*, 3 November 1837), in the United States it was important to prove that “the Americans speak better English than [...] Britishers” (*The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 January 1884).

The data for the present investigation, 335 nineteenth-century “letters to the editor” and newspaper articles dealing with issues of pronunciation, were gathered from *The British Newspaper Archive*, *The Guardian and Observer Digital Archives (1800-2000)*, *The Times Archive: 1785-1899* and *Newspapers.com*.

My previous research has shown that, during the eighteenth century, the keywords related to the standard language debate (i.e. “provincial pronunciation”, “vulgar accent”, etc.) did not only acquire new connotations, but they also contributed to the reinforcement of a ‘social divide’ which mirrored the desire of the middle class who – it should not be forgotten – represented the primary clientele and readership of pronouncing dictionaries and manuals (see Sturiale 2014, 2016a and 2016b). Accordingly, the qualitative analysis for the present study involved searching, in the aforementioned databases, for the keywords ACCENT and PRONUNCIATION and collocates such as VULGAR, PROVINCIAL, VICIOUS, which had characterised the eighteenth-century standard language debate. However, other collocates, like AMERICAN, BRITISH and so on were included in the search since they added a somewhat patriotic flavour to the nineteenth-century prescriptive discourse. The resulting items were then filtered manually in order to collect all those letters and articles which referred specifically to the English language.

This study examines a selection of those letters and articles in order to shed light on the laypeople’s perception of and attitude toward ‘proper English’ as mirrored by newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic. Special attention will be paid to those phonological features which, to use Sheridan’s wordings (1761: 30), had “some degree of disgrace annexed to them”, such as *h*-dropping, non-rhoticity, *yod*-coalescence and *yod*-dropping, which were clear signs of language change and indicators of language variation.

2. English is English

As stated above, the fear of ‘linguistic instability’ in Britain had led to the social stigmatisation and marginalisation of certain ‘provincial’ accents as early as the eighteenth century, thus consolidating a linguistic, yet

stereotypical, North-South divide. Moreover, from the outset the issue of 'provincialism' supported the claim that 'English is English', this first on the part of the orthoepists, as is demonstrated by Kenrick's words (among those of others) already in 1784:

There seems indeed a most ridiculous absurdity in the pretensions of a native of Aberdeen or Tipperary, to teach the natives of London to speak and to read. Various have been nevertheless the modest attempts of the Scots and Irish, to establish a standard of English pronunciation. That they should not have succeeded is no wonder. Men cannot teach others what they do not themselves know. (Kenrick 1784: ii)

In later years the press sustained assertions like the one we can read in the following 1786 newspaper article, which clearly echoes Kenrick's defence of 'English English':

- (1) [...] in an age like this, when attempts of a much more arduous nature are every day presented to our notice: when pigs are brought to exercise all the functions of rationality; and Hibernians profess to teach the true pronunciation of the English tongue. (*Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, London 14 December 1786)

The 'English is English' propaganda, carried out by orthoepists in their pronouncing dictionaries, was further reinforced in the nineteenth century, and traces of Kenrick's 'complaint', and wording, were still to be found in newspapers, as shown in the example below:

- (2) English Pronouncing Dictionary. It is a curious fact that there is no English Pronouncing Dictionary compiled by an English-man. Stephen Jones was a Welshman, Sheridan was an Irishman, and Walker was a Scotchman [sic]. (*The Age*, London 22 August 1841)

So, if on the one hand orthoepists and lexicographers were responsible for the marginalisation of regional varieties (especially of 'provincial varieties'), on the other hand, in the nineteenth century, the media reinforced accent stereotypes and contributed to the language debate involving the public opinion. Northern speakers and their accents started to be stigmatised and the standard accent became a prerogative of southern speakers and of, to quote Sheridan's words, "the beau monde" (Sheridan 1762: 30). Such a belief,

however, was still alive and kicking in the early twentieth century as proved by a certain “Plain English” in his/her letter to the editor of *The Observer*:

- (3) Is it not time, Sir, that a committee of thoroughbred Englishmen got together to protect our spoken language and to fix one or more purely English standards? I understand that there is not one Englishman on the B.B.C. Committee on pronunciation of English. For too long we have been content to submit to the egotistical self-sufficiency of Welshmen, Irishmen, Ulstermen, Jews, Caledonians, and Glaswegians in this matter. The Lowthian Scot has, of course, had no say, as English has been his native tongue since the time of Ida the Flame-bearer. – Yours faithfully PLAIN ENGLISH. (*The Observer*, 4 February 1934)

3. English English vs. American English

In the United States, as a result of their much-vaunted linguistic independence from Britain, the prescriptivist debate was supported by linguistic patriotism (cf. Sturiale 2012. See also Bronstein 1954 and Twomey 1963) as it had been declared by Webster in the 1780s:

Great Britain whose children we are, and whose language we speak, should no longer be our standard; for the taste of her writers is already corrupted, and her language on the decline. (Webster 1789: 20)

The nineteenth century witnessed a clear change in the way Americans related to the speech of their “English cousins”¹. The eighteenth-century dependence on Sheridan (1780) and Walker (1791) soon turned into a clear dissatisfaction, especially with the model of pronunciation offered by the Irish scholar:

- (4) The best authorities we can adopt are, undoubtedly, the best lexicographers of England. Of these Walker is deservedly esteemed the first of the first rank. The partial credit which Sheridan has detained in this country has done much injury, by inducing not a few to adopt the aspirated sound of *d* and *t* in such words as *due*, *produce*,

¹ Gilbert M. Tucker, in his article on “American English”, wrote: “our English cousins have a good deal yet to learn about our common language as used in the two countries” (Tucker 1883: 56).

tutor, tumult, &c.; a practice directly at issue with the express rules of Walker, analogy and every correct ear. According to Sheridan a turn becomes a *churn*, and a *duel* a jewel – Walker’s rule, in such cases, is no less agreeable to the ear, than to the analogy of the language. [...] But the practice of Sheridan, I am happy to observe, is rapidly declining, and will, probably, soon be abolished. Let Walker be adopted in his stead –let his system be the standard of pronunciation in every school, and the few remaining anomalies will soon be extirpated. (*The Evening Post*, 8 October, 1816)

Later, Thomas Sheridan would be criticised for the same reason by Webster, and blamed for “contribut[ing] very much to propagate the change of *tu* into *chu*, or *tshu*; as in *natshur*” (Webster 1828: Introduction). Indeed, *yod*-coalescence in words like DUKE had been marked as ‘improper’ also by Walker in 1791². That phonological change, perceived as a clear signal of linguistic instability, had already been the topic of an article published in the *Massachusetts Gazette*, 4 September 1769, and reproduced by Dunlap (1940):

- (5) The bar, till of late years, has been usually reckoned the school for purity of expression and propriety of pronunciation; but at present nine tenths of the gentlemen at the bar affect a vicious pronunciation, and vicious in the extreme. Whether they run into this mode merely out of compliment to a particular gentleman on the Bench, or whether they think it an improvement upon the English language, it is left to themselves to determine. A gentleman of letters who about four years and foretold that this vicious pronunciation would be imitated and adopted by many of the young students in law, wrote [...] a letter, in which he particularly pointed out the bad effect it would have upon the English language, unless he attempted to correct himself of so horrid and cacophonous a pronunciation. This gentleman then very roundly told the great lawyer that he pronounced the words *nature*, *nacher*; *odious*, *ojus*; *creature*, *creacher*; *immediate*, *immegiante*; *either*, *æther*; *neither*, *neether*; *were*, *wor*; *squadron*, *squaydron*; *induce*, *injuice*; *due*, *jew*; *virtue*, *virchew*; *pleasure*, *plusher*; *measure*, *mesher*; *endeavor*,

² “There is a slight deviation often heard in the pronunciation of this word, as if written *Dook*; but this borders on vulgarity; the true sound of the *u* must be carefully preserved, as if written *Dewk*. There is another impropriety in pronouncing this word, as if written *Jook*; this is not so vulgar as the former, and arises from an ignorance of the influence accent” (Walker 1791: *ad vocem*).

engever; inveterate, invecherate; righteous, rycheous; fortune, forchune.
(Dunlap 1940: 364)

Interestingly, the accent of the bar together with that of other “men of letters, eminent orators, and polite speakers in London” had been selected, and promoted, as the model accent (“true pronunciation”) and example of the much admired “best practice”, as reported by the Scottish orthoepist William Perry in the title page of his pronouncing dictionary (Perry 1775). However, the spectrum of variation even within the speech of “people in polite life” (Sheridan 1762: 30), which might have resulted in “vicious” pronunciation, did not remain unnoticed on both sides of the Atlantic.

Moreover, the patriotic feeling which animated American scholars, commentators and laypeople was recurrently projected into language debates. Claims such as (6) “we speak the English language a little better, than they do in England” (*Indiana State Sentinel* 6 March 1849), or (7) “the Americans speak better English than you Britishers” (*The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 January 1884) were not only common but often accompanied by sarcastic comments which gave rise to stereotypical descriptions of “British English”, such as:

- (6) You drive the syllables of your words together like a shut telescope; but then, after all, you can’t be blamed so much, for England’s such a little country, you know, that you have to compress things all you can, even your words – *Boston Transcript*. (*The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 January 1884)

or:

- (7) English pronunciation itself seems invented to save time, they eat their letters and whistle the words. Thus Voltaire had some reason to say “the English gain two hours a day more than we do, by eating their syllables.” (*The Examiner*, 24 July 1847)

and were often sarcastic and anecdotal in form:

- (8) A girl at Long Branch speaks with an acquired London accent. “Me cawt, me cawt, at 5 o’clock”, she said to the family coachman, in a voice loud enough for a veranda full of people to hear “Caught what, miss?” the man inquired. A repetition of the order did not make him understand it, and she had to say, in plain American pronunciation, though she lowered her voice and stepped closer in doing so: “My

cart, stupid; my village cart, at 5 o'clock". (*Reading Times*, Reading, Pennsylvania, 3 August 1883)

This last example will introduce my next topic: the pronunciation of the grapheme <r> which marked a change in British English and soon become stigmatized by Americans. Moreover, it also made clear the fact that 'acquiring' a London/British accent was no longer something to aspire to in late nineteenth-century America.

4. Phonological changes and stigmatization

In December 1890 *The Times* published a very long letter (more than 500 words) with the title "Modern English pronunciation" and signed by "A Country Rector"³. In the two opening sentences one reads:

- (9) [I]n modern English the letter R has become, or is becoming, a silent sign, or at best a kind of half-vowel, in a large class of words in which we of an older generation were taught carefully to sound it. As a fact, the change is observable enough, its cause I am disposed to attribute not to the growth of scientific philology, but to that of pure laziness. (*The Times*, 27 December 1890)

There "fashion" or "pure laziness" were denounced as the cause of an "observable" change. The change in question regarded the loss of rhoticity in Southern English and as the "Country Rector" put it:

- (10) between "law" and "lore", "laud" and "lord", and the like respectively, there is no difference in sound, and that so say the great doctors and professors at Oxford and elsewhere. (*The Times*, 27 December 1890)

For some, that change signaled a "process of decay" already denounced in a letter to the editor of the *St James's Gazette*, dated 6 April 1883. The author of the letter, the Irish phonetician James Lecky, wrote:

- (11) To what extent the consonant *r* has been lost in actual speech is an important question of English philology. It has been investigated by

³ The letter is dated "December 22".

several: amongst whom Mr. Ellis, of the Philological Society, holds a distinguished place. Their researches [sic.] have exploded the common notion that this sin of omission besets none but Londoners. It prevails throughout the whole east coast of England, and most of all among the cultivated classes of society. [...] Those who, like myself, always pronounce an *r* even in *iron*, can only utter an unavailing protest against this process of decay, which has confounded *father* with *farther*, *stalk* with *stork*, *Leah* with *Lear*, etc. The rising generation are satisfied, no doubt, with their own dialect, and treat our disapproval with indifference. – I am, Sir, your obedient servant, James Leckey. (*St James's Gazette*, dated 6 April 1883)⁴

Similarly, various American newspaper articles and reviews took advantage of this in order to stigmatise the “process of decay” which was taking place in England, as in the following example:

- (12) Some aspersion has been cast on the Americans' pronunciation of the English language. I think the English actors are not above reproach in this respect, for I have never heard a rule that teaches us to pronounce here “heah” or there “theah”. (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 20 January 1889)

Among the issues which often came to the fore in newspapers, it is possible to identify the general attitude towards variation and certain language changes. In the following section, I will focus on another phonological change likewise regarded as a sign of linguistic instability.

4.1 *The Poor Letter H*

In the period under investigation, in England the pronunciation of <h> had already become a symbol of social divide, a reason for linguistic insecurity in some speakers and, as rightly claimed by Mugglestone,

one of the foremost signals of social identity, its presence in initial positions associated almost inevitably with the ‘educated’ and ‘polite’ while its loss commonly triggers popular connotations of the ‘vulgar’, the ‘ignorant’, and the ‘lower class’. (Mugglestone 2003: 95)

⁴ The same letter appeared in the American newspaper *Brown County World* (3 May 1883).

In that context, the publishing market responded with a series of instructing manuals and pamphlets whose aim was to assist the lower-middle-class in acquiring proper pronunciation. *The Poor Letter H*⁵, to which I am indebted for the title of this section, was one of them (see Mugglestone 2003: 95ff.).

Newspapers also instructed their readers and, at the same time, contributed to the maintenance of the standard. Let us consider the following example, where the word HUMBLE comes to the fore:

- (13) I have been taught and teach that the “h” in humble is not aspirated and on reference to Walker’s Pronouncing Dictionary (and I do not know any other or better authority on such matters) I find the word “humble” classed among the words in which the ‘h’ is not to be aspirated. Yet, Sir, I confess that at church I do frequently hear clergymen pronounce the word “humble” with an aspirate, particularly in the phrase “humble and hearty thanks”. (*The Times*, 27 December 1856)

Here the reader of the *Times*, a certain MARIAN, makes the point clear by referring to Walker’s *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791), still the unquestioned authority on matters of elocution. However, what should be noted here is that even men of the cloth, together with practitioners of the law, did not remain unaffected by ‘vicious pronunciations’⁶. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Sturiale 2016a: 43), many letters of complaint were addressed to the editors about the sometimes ‘vulgar’ or ‘provincial’ pronunciations heard on London stages, once another ‘unquestioned’ authority in matters of pronunciation.

Variation, and change, in the pronunciation of *wh*-words, where /h/ was once again at stake, was another topic debated in Britain:

- (14) Sir, – “W.A.M.” is wrong in the instances he adduces of Irishmen misplacing the “h”. Let him and others who consider the pronunciation referred to incorrect consult the Dictionaries and amend their own pronunciation.

Webster’s note on the subject is as follows: –

⁵ Hon. Henry H., 1854-1866, *Poor Letter H: Its Use and Abuse*. London.

⁶ In defining “vulgar pronunciation”, a reader of *The Blackburn Standard* made a list of phonological habits to be avoided, such as the use “of the letter *r* at the end of words ending with a vowel” and the pronunciation of “the termination of words ending in *ing* with a *k*”. To this he or she also added: “Equally glaring is the taking away of *h* from places where it is required, and giving it where its absence is desirable” (*The Blackburn Standard*, 18 October 1837).

“In words beginning with *wh* the letter *h* or aspirate, when both letters are pronounced precedes the sound of *w*. Thus, *what*, *when* are pronounced *hwat*, *hwen*. So they were written by our ancestors, and so they ought to be written still, as they are by the Danes and Swedes”.

Walker’s note (397) is to the same effect; it concludes thus: –

“In the pronunciation of allwords beginning with *wh* we ought to breathe forcibly before we pronounce the *w*, as if the words were written *hoo-at*, *hoo-ile*, &c., and then we shall avoid that feeble cockney pronunciation which is so disagreeable to a correct ear”. Yours, &c., ALEX. COMYNS. (*The Times*, 7 June 1878)

This change was recurrently used as the subject matter of news articles as well as letters to editors, like the following one:

- (15) At any rate, if the Americans murder the Queen’s English in their own way [...] I am sure we do equally in ours; and certainly the letter ‘h’ has a ‘better time of it’ with them than with us: indeed on the whole, I think that, man for man and woman for woman, the Americans speak better English than ourselves; though I believe our highest standard to be above theirs. – *Maurice O’Connor Morris*. (*Preston Chronicle*, 15 October 1864)

It also started to be used as a feature distinctive of “British English” by the American press as in (16), a passage taken from a letter entitled, interestingly, “Trans and Cisatlantic English”:

- (16) We have had English actors and actresses enough during the present dramatic season to be able to make comparison of English vs. American pronunciation of our common language [...]. Enrevanche we have incessantly caught the Englishman uttering “wich”, “ware”, “wy” and “wen”, for the American’s “which”, “where” and “when”. (*The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 8 May 1887)

And (17), a letter to the editor of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* about “the English misuse of the letter *h*”⁷:

⁷ Tucker’s scholarly comment was very similar: “As for pronunciation, we [Americans] have our faults of course, in abundance, and ought to amend them with all diligence; but where, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, will you discover any such utter disability of hearing or discernment as can permit men to drop or multiply their *h*’s or transpose their *w*’s and *v*’s?” (Tucker 1883: 57).

- (17) The point, however, with which the misunderstanding seems to originate in the use of the letter “h” preceded by a “w”, as in the words “what”, “which”, “wheat”. The aspiration of the “h” in this case is a peculiarity of the American pronunciation, which is observed in England neither by the educated nor the uneducated classes. The American method is without doubt the correct one, as words of this class originally began with the aspiration as is shown by their etymological history. Thus “what” is derived from the Anglo-Saxon “hwaet”. [...] It is not my desire to go any further into the subject than to point out the error and to show the injustice Americans unwittingly commit in laying this charge at the doors of the educated classes of English people. John Bull. (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, 29 February 1876)

4.2 Americanisms vs Britishisms

On 30 July 1870 the *Glasgow Evening Post* published some excerpts taken from volume II of *The Americans at Home*, which was published in the same year by the British traveller David Macrae. Chapter XXVII was dedicated to “Americanisms”:

- (18) Let me enumerate now a few of the peculiarities of American pronunciation and expression that attracted my attention. Mrs. Stowe’s way of pronouncing “Duke”, common enough in some parts of England, is universal in America. In almost all the words which with us have the sound of “u” the Americans give the sound of “oo”. They speak about “noospapers”, about “Noo York”, “Noo Orleans” [...]. Several times in New England, even amongst educated people, I heard “does” pronounced “dooz”. The Americans are amused just as much at our provincialisms – at the Cockney “hasking for heggs”, at the Scotchman’s broad accent, and at the pronunciation given here to some of their proper names. (*Glasgow Evening Post*, 30 July 1870)

So, if on the one hand *yod*-coalescence was becoming acceptable in Britain, as shown in (5), and was a clear indicator of ‘Britishness’ for the Americans, on the other hand *yod*-dropping was experiencing something different. Indeed, it was soon doomed to become a stereotypical ‘Americanism’. Another interesting testimony is offered by an article which appeared in the *Durham County Advertiser* in 1854:

- (19) It is not the fashion with us [...] to call “beauty” *booty*, nor duty *dooty*, nor “due” *doo*: neither would the adoption of *tew* for “too” nor *noos* for “news” [...] and countless similar expressions, slip very glibly off our tongues; but if you only ask an American why he so pronounces them, he will tell you that he believes it to be the right way; and if you remind him that there are no such words, as he occasionally uses, in the English language, his answer will be, “The mayn’t be in *yours*, but there are in *ours*!” –*Alfred Bunn’s Old and New England (Durham County Advertiser, 27 January 1854)*

The “fashion” consisted in the so called “Later Yod Dropping” (Glain 2012: 6), in which /j/ is dropped when it is preceded by /t, d, n, s, z, r, l/ and when it is followed by /u/. This became a peculiarity of nineteenth-century American pronunciation and later resulted in the innovative “Generalised Yod Dropping”.

5. Concluding remarks

Letters to the editor and articles show that newspapers and their readers made a concerted effort to indicate and safeguard a model accent as the linguistic ideal to be attained. In so doing, along the same lines as orthoepists and elocutionists, newspapers played an important role in the prescription of (British or American) English Pronunciation which, in the nineteenth century, imposed itself as “a status emblem” (Agha 2003: 231). Readers were fully aware of the ‘instructing role’ of newspapers, as stated by a reader of *The New York Times* in 1871:

Now, Mr. Editor, the Press is becoming more and more the educator of the people. They look to it not only for information but also trust to a great extent its judgement in matters which are beyond their knowledge, and the *TIMES* has for the most part been found reliable and true to its mission as an instructor [...]. (*New York Times, 23 October 1871*)

Then, as now, in Lesley Milroy’s words:

Although debates about standard English are [and were] a staple of the British press (in the United States the most contentious ideological debates are usually slightly differently oriented [...]), experts and

laypersons alike have [and had] just about as much success in locating a specific agreed spoken standard variety in either the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. (Milroy 1999: 173)

However, what should be noted here is that the debate which at its outset had foregrounded the standard language ideology of eighteenth-century Britain was now characterised by “a class-based system of absolutes” (Mugglestone 1988: 176; see also Sturiale 2014). By the late nineteenth century the focus had shifted to the maintenance of the standard – or better, of ‘the two standards of English’, which seemed to be under siege by “slovenliness”, even among educated speakers⁸.

To sum up, readers expressed their own opinions and attitudes to social (and geographical) variation in language, attempting to structure their arguments logically and factually in order to support and justify their argumentation and points of view. However, their letters mirrored the essence of linguistic instability, of the changes under way, and also of the normative tradition which had dominated up to then. To language historians they prove to be “reliable data”, to recall once again Görlach’s words (1999: 26), for the study of “what people thought about linguistic correctness and prestige (and how such opinions related to the same person’s actual usage)”.

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⁸ In a letter to the editor of *The Times*, a reader replied to “A Country Rector” – see (9): “Sir, The letter of “A Country Rector”, drawing attention to the neglect of English as a living and spoken language in our schools and home circles, deals with a subject of great interest and importance. [...] For a clear and good pronunciation in reading and speaking, without slovenliness or affectation, is an acquisition as valuable as it is now, unhappily, rare” (*The Times*, 2 January 1891, p. 8).

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Address: MASSIMO STURIALE, Università degli Studi di Catania, Struttura Didattica Speciale di Lingue e Letterature Straniere, Via Orfanotrofio 49, 97100 Ragusa Ibla (Italy).

ORCID code: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6886-8568>.