From Plato to Aristotle -
Investigating Early Australian English

1. Early Australian English – the State of the Art

The possible origins and developments of early Australian English (AusE) are still under debate. Many different questions have been asked. They can be summed up in the following way:

1. How did AusE come to be a distinctive variety of English?
2. What is the linguistic input of AusE?
3. How did it develop lexically?
4. How is it possible that AusE is so remarkably uniform across a whole continent?
5. Where, when and how did the three sociolects (Broad, General and Cultivated) arise?

Many scholars have tackled these questions and have come up with a number of answers. However, no consensus has been achieved yet. This is because mostly 'Reason' has formed the basis of the answers. There are as yet too few empirical studies of early AusE.

Although 'Reason' is always a good companion for the scholar, it cannot stand alone. Empirical facts, especially the investigation of actual instances of early AusE, must be an integral part for good answers to the questions posed above. Thus Plato, the founder of Rational Investigations, must be followed by Aristotle, the founder of Empiricism.

What answers have been given so far?

1. How did AusE come to be a distinctive variety of English?

Basically there are three different positions here. The majority view is that AusE is the result of a mixing of dialects with Collins (1975) and, to some extent, Horvath (1985) claiming that the mixing had already taken place already in the greater London area while Bernard (1969, 1981) and Trudgill (1986, the only one to take not only pronunciation but also lexis and grammar into consideration) contend that most of the mixing must have taken place on Australian soil.

Turner (1960), Gunn (1972), Hammarström (1980) and Cochrane (1989) believe in the direct 'transplantation' of a London dialect to Australia, which has not changed much. As evidence they use investigations of the phonological systems of **present-day Broad** AusE and **present-day** or **earlier** 'Cockney'.

Mitchell (1995) shows his superior historical insight when he suggests a compromise by pointing to the fact that due to the Agrarian and the beginning Industrial Revolution the regional dialects of England had already started to break down in eighteenth and nineteenth century England. So the dialects had already been mixed and levelled, especially in the great urban centres, prior to the European settlement of Australia. This process was then continued in the colonies.

2. What linguistic input do we have?

AusE is undoubtedly very closely related to the English spoken in south-eastern England. But where did the first European Australians actually hail from?

The most reliable figures about the origins of the early Australians come from the counties of trial of the convicts (cf. Robson 1955:155). The early statistical material for the population in Australia is, however, very thin. The first colonial counts, up to the 1850s, did little more than note whether someone was born in Australia or not (cf. Price 1987:3).

Taking Robson's calculations we find that 17 per cent of the male convicts were tried in London. Lancashire accounted for 7, Dublin for 5, Yorkshire for 4 and Warwickshire for 3 per cent. All other counties had 2 per cent or less. Overall, 71 per cent of all male convicts had been tried in England, 22 per cent in Ireland, 5 per cent in Scotland and the rest overseas. A comparison of place of trial and place of birth shows that at the country level the varations between these is small (cf. Jupp 1989:24).

Considering the above facts, it seems surprising that so much emphasis has always been laid on the London heritage of AusE. Demographically the picture is much more complicated.

a) What did the Irish contribute?
According to Ramson (1966), Bernard (1969) and many others, the Irish did not contribute much to the formation of AusE, despite forming some 25 per cent of the European antipodean population in the nineteenth century. Of late, several scholars have criticised this opinion. Troy (1992:460) contends that no Irish influence has been found, because no one has looked for it thoroughly. Horvath (1985:39) and Trudgill (1986:139f) have provided lists of features that could have originated in Irish English (IrE) or even Gaelic, which was still spoken by a number of Irish in Australia.
O'Farrell (1989, 1996) and Fitzpatrick (1994) have shown the close family patterns which the Irish maintained in Australia. Fritz (2000a,b and no date) has shown that this could lead to a preservation of IrE elements. Taylor (1992, 1998, 2001) and Lonergan (fc.) discuss lasting impacts on AusE.
A closer look at actual language data, an empirical approach, could thus prove previous assumptions not to be correct.

b) What is the input of the convicts?
The proportion of convicts and their contribution to early Australian English has always been very much exaggerated. The numbers Ward (1958) gives for the convicts and those of convict origin can be shown to be misleading (Mitchell 1995:44) and were taken over too uncritically by scholars like Horvath (1985), Gunn (1992) and others.
Although some convict terms and even some instances of 'cant' have entered AusE (cf. Langker 1980, 1981), their homogeneity as a speech group, and thus their impact, has been more surmised than proved (cf. Mitchell 1995:7). It is very questionable if there was ever something like a homogeneous group of convicts and/or ex-convicts who formed a coherent linguistic community that itself was distinguished from the language of those who had arrived free or were born free. The convicts came from very diverse backgrounds. Moreover, the divisions between convicts, freed and free were not as sharp as many assume and certainly much less so than in 'Merry ol' England'.
The protestations of some free immigrants that the convicts and emancipist **should be** separated much more from the rest of society were not effective. The rise of many ex-convicts to respectable social status is testified in numerous cases, e.g. the Reibey family as described by Irvine (1992).
Thomas Fellon's letter to his wife in 1835 praises the good living-standard and opportunities for convicts and ex-convicts. This would not have been possible if he, or all convicts, had shown a use of language easily recognisable as being the speech of a criminal and thus detested. Indeed, his language is non-standard, but not in the way described by author of 'cant' dictionaries.

> Der mary, I never work one day but fourteen days for myselfe since I been in this cuntry because it is not allowed by Government but if i wonst got my liberty I cud [...] ten shillings per day Der mary let me know in youre next letter is my fathere live or know or did my sister go to meracar or know Der mary this is fine cuntry is there is in the wourld for ateing and drinking Der mary if you wore in this cuntry you cud be worth pound per week but by owne labour [...]. <2-129>[1]

Empirical investigation of frequencies of convict terminology is asked for. Over and above that, actual language use of convicts and ex-convicts should be compared with that of other social groups before drawing far-reaching conclusion about their contribution to the formation of AusE.

3. How did it develop lexically?
The lexical development of AusE is well-documented in the works of William Ramson (e.g. 1966, 1988). Ramson (1966) uses data culled from personal readings of thousands and thousands of pages of early AusE. Due to the method employed, the number of words is restricted and frequencies or links between language user and item used are not taken into account. Sometimes, Ramson's

---

[1] For an explanation of this number see below. Details about the source are given in the Appendix.

findings resemble more a literary discussion than a linguistic analysis. A modern style corpus investigation could thus make the findings much more thorough and insightful.

His 1988 *Australian National Dictionary: A Dictionary of Australianisms on Historical Principles* (AND) is a very valuable work since it not only lists the words but also quotes extensively from the sources used. Thus it is possible to go back to the sources and to ascertain the meanings and functions of the words under investigation. However, even this laudable book provides us with little or no information about frequencies and usage by particular groups.

4. How is it possible that AusE is so remarkably uniform across the continent?

It has always been thought remarkable that AusE is so uniform all over the continent. Even the three acknowledged sociolects of AusE seem to be the same everywhere. There are only a few regionalized lexical items which make a distinction between speakers of AusE from different states possible. This has been called into question recently.

Basically, there are three theories that try to explain this uniformity. Those who believe in a direct transplantation of London English to the antipodes see no problem at all.

The second, and strongest group, sees AusE originating in the early phase of the colony in a kind of 'Sydney mixing-bowl'. This amalgam would then spread and level out all other influences through the astonishing mobility of Australians and the fact that 'new chums' always try to blend in linguistically with the 'old hands'.

Görlach (1991:150) questions the 'Sydney mixing-bowl' approach in the following way:

> 1. As the spread of settlements shows, the early speech communities in the east were separated by hundreds of miles from those in the west, and what internal movements there were can hardly have sufficed to spread, say, Sydney norms throughout the continent; and
>
> 2. convicts and their descendants formed the majority in NSW until at least 1840 [this again repeats Ward's misleading numbers], when transportation to this state was ended. Apart from NSW, only Tasmania (from 1804 to 1852) and Western Australia received convicts, but WA did so only from 1850-68. This means that their speech cannot possibly have had any large impact on the entire WA speech community - as indeed the contemporary Irish immigrants failed to have.

It is true that the early communities were very far apart. But Hobart and Norfolk, the earliest settlements outside the Sydney area were settled from Sydney and contact between all of them was frequent.

The second point Görlach takes up can be easily refuted, too. It stems from his assumption about an alleged uniformity of convict speech and its lasting impact on AusE. He even seems to believe that the convicts of Western Australia (WA) spoke exactly the same, and to his mind very distinct, English as the ones who had reached Australia's shores 62 years earlier.

Undeniably the settlement of WA was very isolated and could well have developed its own dialect. But whatever dialect there may have been was surely swamped by the gold rushes of the 1890s.

A rather isolated position is taken up by Bernard (1969). He also thinks of a mixing-bowl, but in his opinion, this operated in all the major sea-ports (Port Jackson, Hobart, Port Phillip, etc.) and since we have the same linguistic input everywhere, the outcome of the mixing was the same and later also homogenized by the above mentioned high mobility.

Although this question seems by and large settled, there are some points which warrant closer investigation, in fact investigation which can only be done empirically. It should prove very rewarding to study the actual linguistic accommodation processes taking place in Sydney and elsewhere. Another point worthy of interest is the study of early language use in South Australia (SA) and WA, the two colonies where local dialects seem likeliest. In order to do this we have again to take recourse to empirical data, nothing else will suffice.

5. Where, when and how did the three sociolects (Broad, General and Cultivated) arise?

The existence of three sociolects of AusE has been convincingly shown by the pioneering work of Mitchell and Delbridge (1965). All of these, Broad, General and Cultivated AusE, are very similar and movement from one variety to the other seems easy (Bernard 1969:70). The question of the origin of the sociolects is, however, a very contentious issue.

Cochrane (1989) and Horvath (1985) believe that the sociolects, at least Broad and Cultivated were there from the beginning. Görlach (1991) also talks of two sociolects, although he remains cautious about the supposed sharp divisions between the two speech communities. According to Horvath, General developed later when social class barriers broke down in Australia and the speakers of the two original sociolects mixed.

This assumption is based on the view of early Australia as a sharply divided society, where brutally treated criminals could never be the equals of free immigrants. This clearly contradicts historical fact.

Borrie (1994:34f), for example, presents figures, collected in 1821 by an Emancipist Committee protesting against alleged attempts to restrict their rights, that show that they had twice the number of sheep and colonial vessels, three times more land under cultivation and four times more town houses than the free immigrants.

Of course there were different sociolects (as well as dialects) in early Australia. But it is also very clear that these sociolects do not correspond to today's sociolects.

Influential historians like Robson (1955), Shaw (1966) and Clark (1975, 1977) have depicted convicts as monstrous, lacking education, moral standards or the ability to love their children. However, a modern generation of scholars has shown a very different picture. Indeed, what Shaw, Robson and Clark have to say about the convicts seems to reveal more about them than about the transportees. Nicholas & Shergold (1988:5f) rightly state:

> For example, even though [Manning] Clark found that the transported criminals had surprisingly high levels of literacy, he argued that the criminal class was characterised by mental imbecility, low cunning and ignorance. The fact that the percentage of […] skilled urban trades people, was higher than the percentage of labourers and agricultural labourers combined, is ignored.
> In his 37-page analysis of 'Who are the Convicts?', A.G.L. Shaw barely mentions their occupational backgrounds. And the most thorough and careful quantitative study by Lloyd Robson displays a near total disregard for the statistical evidence on occupations. […]
> Much of the analysis of the convict system in Australia rests on two assumptions by historians; that the organisation of forced convict labour differed significantly from free labour; and that convictism was inefficient. Both assumptions have received unanimous assent; neither assumption has been explicitly tested.

Convicts were not treated too badly, divisions were not as rigid as post-convict era literary writings (such as the ones by Marcus Clarke in the 1870s and Price Warung in the 1890s and others) suggest (cf. Kociumbas 1992:257; Nicholas & Shergold 1988:11).

Australian society, including the convicts, was better educated than the overall population of the British Isles (cf. Cleverly, 1971:134; Jupp, 1989:555; Nicholas & Shergold, 1988:9).

As shown above, class distinctions were by far cry not as rigid in Australia than in Great Britain. So the sometimes encountered criticism of the rise of convicts and emancipists reflects more the fears of middle-class people who are not sure of their standing than the reality of early Australian society. This breaking down of class barriers is confirmed in the sources. John Maxwell, an Irish immigrant, writes in 1884:

> I saw M. Hawthorn [his social superior] today. He was telling me he had got a situation. [...]. He is very sociable here and stops and shakes hands with either Hugh or I when he meets us but Australia and the crossing of the line makes a great change on people's sociability. <4-076>

Another argument against Horvath's hypothesis runs as follows. How should it be possible that there were two or three sociolects from the beginning which all evolved in the same direction, becoming ever more similar, with no common model to aim at? Did Governor Macquarie (with his Scottish burr) or Governor Bourke (with his Anglo-Irish accent) speak Cultivated AusE or a proto-form of that? Certainly not. People of this class either left Australia, and thus had no lasting linguistic impact, or, if they stayed and made Australia their home, assimilating their language slowly towards an arising accepted standard. The examples of Macquarie and Bourke also show that even England's upper class was not speaking with a unified accent, well into the 19th century not even using a unified spelling or grammar, until the establishment of certain codes at public schools furthered the rise of RP later.

Bernard (1969, 1981; supported by Gunn 1972) claims that Broad AusE was there from very early on and social pressures to adapt the language led to the emergence of General and from that to Cultivated. Mitchell (1995:61) and others are extremely sceptical of such a course of development, since the social forces must have been extraordinary and yet only pertaining to a limited number of people. Moreover, phonologically nothing inherent Broad suggests a logical development into General.

Convicts, freed, free, soldiers, pastoralists and others, they all came from similar geographical and dialectal backgrounds. They all contributed to the emergence of Broad Australian and provided the language pattern that was then indigenised by the first generations of the native native-borns. Mitchell (1995:62) therefore claims convincingly that external influences must have brought about the existence of General alongside an already established Broad. He suggests that this influence can be found in the second wave of British immigration beginning in 1830 and greatly expanded in the gold rush period. The newcomers were simply too many to be assimilated completely. Cultivated, according to Mitchell (1995:63), developed later out of group choices.

The most convincing theory about the development of the sociolects of AusE has been put forth by Mitchell (1995). It is most in line with historical facts and reasonable interpretation of these.

Still, it is only a theory and only an empirical investigation could deepen our understanding of what happened exactly in the formation processes of AusE.

What has to be looked at is the actual existence of sharply divided social groups using linguistically definable sociolects.