

Lord Rant: A personal journey through prejudice, accent and identity

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This is a personal account of a journey around some of my own and other people's prejudices about accents, both regional L1, and L2 accents. Crucially, this journey made me realise that my own history of personal prejudices is not over.

1 Inventing Lord Rant

While writing a chapter on L2 accents for a forthcoming book, I suffered writer's block. I had chosen five recordings (L2 English speakers from France, Venezuela, Romania, Poland, and Sudan), and I wanted to include a 'prejudice perspective' on each accent. I therefore needed a set of comments – with examples of prejudices – which I would then react against, about each recorded extract. I wanted the prejudiced comments to focus on the specific features of each extract (e.g. 'live' sounding like 'leave') as well as more general features such as 'sounding French' or 'sounding American'. Where was I to find such comments? I also needed to distance myself – as an author – from the comments because it was important for me to avoid offending those people whose voices I had recorded, and some respected colleagues, who are prominent in the ELF movement.

Eventually I hit on the idea of inventing a character who would 'voice' these prejudices. My hope was that relevant points would emerge if I creatively imagined myself into the mind of someone who has every possible prejudice (racist, sexist, as well as linguistic). Afterwards, my thinking was, I could edit out the truly nasty bits, but retain any substantive issues that related to the recordings, and which could be re-worded in reasonably harmless ways. I thought that if any blameworthy material remained, I could pass on the blame to my fictional character.

Thus it was that I invented 'Lord Rant' – a grumpy old man in his early seventies. He believes that the English language is like his stately home: a building of unique architecture with pictures of presiding deities on the wall –

Shakespeare, Dickens, Dr Johnson, and Queen Elizabeth II. He believes that the fabric of English is unchanging, but that it nevertheless requires policing and maintenance, so that it can be handed down pure and intact to succeeding generations. He believes that because he is a native speaker, he is an authoritative source of information on the rules of English. He and people like him are owners of English. He has no conception of the idea that English is a global language, and is changing, as it always has been changing (cf. Crystal, 2004).

We'll give examples of Lord Rant's prejudices below, but at this point I should reveal that when I had finished drafting the chapter, and came back to revise it, I realised that the prejudices included those that I myself had held at some point in my life. So the invention of Lord Rant helped me go on a journey into my own past prejudices. And although I brought him into existence to help with L2 accents, I found that it was most revealing about my past prejudices regarding L1 accents: regional accents in the UK, and American accents. We need at this point, a couple of definitions.

2 Definitions: prejudice - identity

We will borrow the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD, 2010) definition of **prejudice**: 'an unreasonable dislike of, or preference for a person, group, custom, etc. especially which it is based on their race, religion, sex, etc'. Prejudice therefore is a judgement we jump to without a rational consideration of evidence, and although we often think of prejudice as being associated with being against something, there is another side, a prejudice in favour of something. Notice also that the concept of dislike comes into this definition, a point I'll return to later.

Lieutenant Cable, a character in the musical 'South Pacific' (Rodgers and Hammerstein, 1949), sings of prejudice as not being something you are born with, but as something 'You've got to be carefully taught'. However, I think most people will agree that prejudices are not 'carefully taught' in the sense of an item on the syllabus: 'Ok, right sit down. Today's lesson in prejudice is...', but certainly the cultural environment that you grow up in makes sure that you learn these prejudices. Agents of this learning include parents, teachers, peer groups, broadcasting agencies, and influential opinion formers, as we will see below.

We'll define **identity** as 'a person's sense of themselves as an individual in relation to other individuals and groups, whose values give them a sense of belonging and self-worth'. A person's accent is an important part of their

personal and social identity. It is, along with visual appearance, a part of the individual's 'face' that is presented to the world (though it is heard, not seen). It is something that, most of the time, the individual pays little attention to. But when attention is drawn to a person's accent they discover that it is an important part of their identity: it can be upsetting when someone says 'it's cute', or laughs at it, or when someone corrects it, or suggests that it should be changed.

3 Lord Rant on L1 regional accents

Lord Rant 'knows' why there are regional accents in Britain: there is the geographic factor, the medical factor, the moral factor, and social class. The geographical factor means that the further away a person lives from London and the home counties, the more likely their accent is likely to differ from the correct pronunciation. If this person is properly educated then their geographical accent may be attractive, but still wrong. He would agree with Dr Johnson who in the eighteenth century spoke of his dissatisfaction with Scots people who go most of the way towards eliminating their accents, but give up when they have almost succeeded:

... certainly a man who conquers nineteen parts of the Scottish accent, may conquer the twentieth. But, sir, when a man has got the better of nine-tenths he grows weary, he relaxes his diligence, he finds he has corrected his accent so far as not to be disagreeable, and he no longer desires his friends to tell him when he is wrong; nor does he choose to be told.

Chapter 24 of Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson.
(1791) Crystal (2004: 404-5)

Dr Johnson views the Scottish accent as something to be conquered, and seems to suggest in the last two clauses ('he no longer...nor does he choose to be told') that some degree of stubbornness is a factor in the Scot's lack of desire to take the last step in conquering his accent.

Lord Rant has also heard that the Liverpool accent originates in the poor health of people living in slums – according to Abercrombie (1997, pp. 94-95) some characteristics of the accent originate from adenoidal problems and are perpetuated by the succeeding generations who acquire this accent and persist in speaking it, despite being encouraged (as we shall see below) not to do so.

Then there is the moral factor – people who speak in a local accent are simply slovenly in their morals and behaviour, and the fact that they speak with the wrong accent is a sure sign that they have stubbornly chosen not to better themselves.

And of course, there is the issue of social class. Here is a statement from a talk given in 1931 by A. Lloyd James, who was reader in phonetics at the University College London, and secretary to the BBC's Advisory committee on spoken English:

A man's pronunciation is often the surest guide to his social status and to his education. [if one pronounces 'County Council' in a local London accent] I must not be surprised if I am told that I am a cockney, that I am not as well-educated as I ought to be perhaps and I have ..certainly no business to teach the pronunciation of the English language to foreigners.

Note that Lloyd James regards being told 'You are a cockney' is a reprimand for a personal failure in education, and that the force of his words 'not as well-educated as I ought to be' contains an element of blame.

Dr Johnson's and Lloyd James's expressions of prejudice have the effect of emphasising distance and separateness of social groups: the Scotsman and the cockney are not members of the groups that Dr Johnson and Lloyd James would have seen themselves as belonging to.

They of course have prejudices in favour their own groups' accents. In 1931, Lloyd James being secretary to the BBC's Committee on spoken English, had the job of recommending the accent to be used by the BBC, the one that we now refer to as Received Pronunciation:

there is supposed to be a representative English Pronunciation a type to be aimed at as an ideal ... It is suitable for national broadcasting without fear of any considerable body of hostile criticism

Notice the use of the words 'without fear of any considerable body of hostile criticism'. In them, there is the sense that he is trying to protect the BBC's complaints department (if they then had one) from being overburdened. There is a tacit acknowledgement that – whatever they decide – there will be some level of criticism, but his hope is that it will not be 'considerable'.

Also in the 1930s, Wyld expressed prejudices in favour of RP which he argues 'is spoken by those often very properly called the best people' and that:

it has two advantages that make it intrinsically superior to every other type of English speech - the extent to which it is current throughout the country and the marked distinctiveness and clarity of its sounds. (Wyld, 1934, p. 605, cited in Honey, 1989)

Wyld's first advantage 'current throughout the country' seems to rest on the assumption that you will move in Lord Rant-type social circles wherever you are in the country, and not mix with the slovenly, the ill, and the stubborn lower classes people who refuse to better themselves.

The second advantage, 'the marked distinctiveness and clarity of its sounds' is one which is scientifically unprovable. The extent to which an accent has these qualities is down to a matter of familiarity with the accent. It is because RP is Wyld's own accent and the accent of his friends and acquaintances, that he believes it has the virtues of 'marked distinctiveness and clarity'.

Prejudices against and for accents help keep social groups apart, but within each group they have a binding force that is a major factor in any group's social identity.

4 Parental, and teacherly concern

If people try to bridge the gap between groups, issues of identity come to the fore. Brian Dakin is from a part of England, the Black Country (north-west of Birmingham), which has an accent that is the subject of much prejudice. His father advised Brian to change his accent when he went to secondary school in the early 1960s:

When yow go to grammar school you gotta drop your doh's, you gotta drop your cor's, becoss you cor spake like that in grammar school. (BBC, 2005b) ('doh' = don't; 'cor' = can't).

Brian tried to follow this advice but found after a while that he did not want to. He thought to himself 'You know. I'm, I'm a council boy and I speak like this and I'm proud of it' and reverted to his Black Country accent.

A teacher's concern to protect her primary school singing group from prejudice also brought up issues of identity. Chamonix, a secondary school student from Liverpool tells of a primary-school teacher – 'dead posh' – who wanted

her and her classmates to not use their Liverpool accent in a singing competition:

"Don't talk like that, don't talk like yer from Liverpool," she said because we'll lose marks, it's like she was saying to us "... talk like you're from somewhere else" ... It's cos she just expects us to be posh just like that when we're not. (BBC, 2005c)

Megan, Chamonix's sister, added the comment 'It felt like she was ashamed of, of who we are and we shouldn't be ashamed of like, what our accent is or somethin.' These two sisters, like Brian from the Black Country, felt that the attempts to change their accents were an attack on their identity – they were being asked to change something about themselves that they were proud of.

Both Brian's father, and Chamonix's teacher may have been motivated by a desire to protect them from prejudice, by encouraging them to change or moderate their accents. But well-intentioned as they are, in seeking to protect the children they are also perpetuating the prejudice. But what is the alternative? They could attempt to change the views of the much larger numbers of people with the prejudices: Brian's father might think of visiting the school and persuading all the teachers and staff to value the Black Country accent; Chamonix's teacher might consider trying to change the attitudes of all the visiting teachers and children from the other schools at the singing competition. But such tasks are clearly impossible, too big for one teacher, or one parent to succeed in.

6 Anti-American

It was when I found out that Lord Rant was really fundamentally anti-American in his responses to accents, that I realised that I had owned these prejudices at some points in my personal history.

Lord Rant likes French accents in their place, in France when they are dealing with him as a paying customer, and in England where French tourists pay to visit his stately home, but he is annoyed by people who live and work here whose accent remains stubbornly French – especially if it is tinged with Americanisms. Having heard Caroline from France talk about her schooldays, he got most annoyed at the American flavour to her pronunciations, for example the four syllable version of 'secondary' /sek.ən.de.ri/ with a non-reduced vowel in the third syllable, as opposed to the three syllable RP version /sek.ən.dri/.

Another example of his anti-American bias can be seen in Lord Rant's comments on someone from Venezuela:

If there is one accent I cannot abide, it is an American accent, and I can hear a strong American influence in this voice! ... his 'city' sounds like 'siddy'!

Lord Rant's specific complaint here focuses on a typical difference between British and American English with the alveolar tap /sɪ.ri/ instead of /sɪ.ti/

Of course Lord Rant's prejudices against American accents were in fact mine. The history of my anti-American prejudice is, when I consider it now, a bit of a puzzle. It seems to have had two phases: one which ended gradually as I recovered from certain disadvantages of my school and university education, and came to know more about the English language. But there was a subconscious second phase which persisted for quite a while longer. There were pockets of dislike buried deep within me would suddenly appear and find expression in prejudiced comments. I think that there are two possible sources for this prejudice. One source might be the dislike I took to people who had annoyed, irritated or angered me in some way, whose personality, or political or religious views I found particularly grating. These people had voices and accents which were unfamiliar (or even unique in my experience). I latched on to the accent, and it became strongly associated with the remembered dislike. I think I then extended the initial emotional reaction (which was to the individual) to the whole group of people who spoke with that accent. So, as I interpret this now, my dislike of an individual got attached to an accent, which is the property of a social group, and within me the dislike then morphed into a prejudice against that social group.

But I think that the real learning of prejudices is far more subtle, more 'under the radar', more isidious. The second source is learned from people we love, are dependent on, respect, and who are influential in our upbringing and education, and influential moulders of behaviour in the social groups to which we want to belong, and with which we want to identify. These influencers help us create our mental maps of 'the world as it is' for 'us-in-the-in-group' and 'them-in-the-outgroup'. The nods, winks, and disparaging references to others (as different, amusing, unliked) gently and lovingly transmit the prejudices of the influencers. The gradual accretion of spoken and unspoken messages (each one perhaps only very slight, but cumulatively very powerful) is sufficient to inculcate a prejudice.

7 Conclusion

Now times have moved on, and my attitudes towards accents have changed, and are still changing. I like to think I have no prejudices, but I suspect that I am very naive to think so. I was certainly naive in thinking that because I had changed the world had changed at the same pace, and that everyone had undergone a similar evolution in their ideas. But no.

I was shocked some years ago to hear a high-ranking university official explain to an equally high-ranking Japanese government official the reason for the existence of the local Birmingham accent: 'Well, there is the geographical factor of course, but the main reason for its existence that the people who speak it are slovenly'. I still remember the shock I felt on hearing this – I had naively felt that the personal journey I had gone on, which had led to the diminution of my personal prejudices was one that everyone had shared. Obviously not. To vary the words of Lieutenant Cable, prejudice 'has to be carefully fought'.

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