

# NEW YORKERS CAN'T SPEAK ENGLISH

BY HUGH MORRISON

ENGLISH as a spoken language is almost as dead in New York as Latin is in Rome. Its place has been taken by New Yorkese, a jargon which is spoken with variations by Gothamites of all classes, including the holders of university chairs and park benches. This *ersatz* language resembles English in every respect save pronunciation. Phonetically it is a grotesque parody. Hearing it for the first time is an unpleasant experience, comparable to one's first look at a cubist statue.

There is a popular belief that the speech of the well-educated is superior to that of the ignorant. Hence the brainy of the Big Town assume without question that their speech is excellent. Actually it would be difficult to find a San Francisco truck driver who mispronounces a fraction of the words commonly mispronounced by the average New York university graduate. The way the proud possessors of sheepskins hack away at what they call English would make a Wyoming sheep-herder

wince. Manhattanites claim that New Yorkese is a dialect of the English language. If it is, then Neapolitans speak Latin, Mexicans converse in Aztec, and residents of Miami discuss the New Deal in Seminole. It is time for those who speak it to learn that New Yorkese is not English, nor is it what H. L. Mencken would call the American language; it is a language by itself.

The New York language has many dialects of its own, the most famous of which is called the "Bowery" dialect. This is a misnomer since it is heard all over town. It is by no means confined to the illiterate, as is commonly believed. Recently Fordham University announced that many of its students said *erl boiner* for *oil burner*. One of the most famous professors of philosophy in the city (name on request) says *foist* as often as any stevedore. A soap-box orator will mount his platform and say, *Fella woikūs! Eighty yeahs ago Koll Mox said, Woikūs of de woild, unite! Yez have nuttin' to lose but yuh chains! Now is de*

*tahm to ogganize and t'row out dose smot graftus lahk Mayuh Hague, de lore of Joiz' Cee, and let de woikus run de guu'ment.* And his hearers will nod in agreement. This is, of course, the worst variety of New Yorkese. The majority of the city's inhabitants can pronounce the sounds of *th* and *er* and laugh at those who cannot. They are blissfully unaware of their own phonetic failings, which make their speech as ludicrous to out-of-town people as the *dese-and-dose* pronunciation is to them.

I was once waiting my turn in a barber shop where municipal affairs were being discussed in Italo-New Yorkese. One barber said, *De muni-sipple aut'orities can't do nuttin' now wit' Dewey in de cidy becauss de're scairt stiff of him.* The fellow waiting next to me said with an air of disgust, *These Guineas were boahn in New Yawk and talk like they come from It'ly. If you ax me, I think w'en a man was boahn in Amurica he ought to talk like an Amurican.*

When I was working as a shipping clerk in a New York concern, a girl who worked in the advertising department would occasionally come in to talk business. She would say: *We have a hunnert calenduhs to send to a customuh in Calcutter, Indier, some tahm in the neah*

*fucha. Also, the boss said not to send any moah advuhtisin' mattuh to Chiner until the woah is ovuh. An' we have a hunt'n fifty memo pads to go to eye-thuh Coster Reecker or El Salvadoah.* At times I felt like throwing my typewriter at her. I have not exaggerated her faults a bit, but have given her the benefit of the doubt in many cases. Her speech was of neither the best nor the worst variety of New Yorkese, but about average. Still, I cannot honestly call it English. When I ventured to discuss the matter with the young lady, she was actually astonished. She said that she was always at the head of her English classes in high school and that in all her four years not one of her teachers had ever found fault with her "English".

That New Yorkese is a young, growing language is shown by its unsettled phonetic system. If you study French or Spanish or Italian your teacher will tell you that the *o* is a vowel, the *t* is a consonant, and the *h* is a mute letter, but if you try to learn New Yorkese you can get no such definite information as to the letter *r*. The Manhattanites simply cannot agree whether it is a vowel, a consonant, or a mute letter. Some pronounce it all the time, some leave it out as often as the Bostonians, and the rest pronounce

it half the time and omit it the other half. Those of the third category seem to be in the majority. One will say *gardner* one minute, *gahdner* the next, then *gardnuh*, and finally *gahdnuh*. Most Gothamites agree that there really should be an *r* sound somewhere in the language, but cannot decide what letter to give it to. People of all three categories tend to put in an occasional *r* where it doesn't belong. I once heard a lecture by a university instructor in history in which he referred to *Havaner Hobba*. Such a man could hardly get a job in a college outside New York; he could get one easily, however, in a vaudeville show. Most New Yorkers pronounce the last syllable of a word ending in the sound of long Italian *a* to rhyme with *roar*. They say *droar* for *draw*, *lore* for *law*, and call the foremost Irish man of letters *B'wahd Shore*.

Even school teachers, who teach New Yorkese but erroneously believe they are teaching English, do not agree as to the classification of the *r*. I have had people tell me that they always thought it was a consonant until school teachers, who thought it was a vowel, made their lives miserable until they began to say *heah* and *befoah*. Also I have had others tell me solemnly that they had *nevuuh huhd* of any *such*

*thing* as *leavin' out the lettuh ah*. And think they prove it when they say *soder wotta* for *soda water*.

The pronunciation of the New Yorkese long *i* is also disputed. Many have a tendency to pronounce it as short Italian *a* in English. They say *ahs* for *eyes*, *tahm* for *time*, and *lahk* for *like*. The contraction *I'll* is usually pronounced *owl*. A few give *ing* its full sound but the great majority either drop the *g* or grossly exaggerate it. The habit of dropping the *g* is by no means confined to New York, but New York is the only place where people who consider themselves cultured and refined treat the letter like a hot potato. The final *g* is heard much more frequently in a Colorado mining camp than in Barnard College.

In New Yorkese the *h* is not dropped all the time, as in Cockney, but is systematically omitted before the sound of long *u*. Thus the Gothamites say *uge*, *uman*, *umane*, *umid*, *umiliate*, *umor*, and so on ad nauseam. The words *humble* and *homage* are also pronounced in true Cockney fashion. This is one rule of Manhattan phonetics over which there is no dispute. University dons adhere to it just as strictly as do traffic cops.

The sound of *wh* is as obsolete in

New Yorkese as the sound of *gh* in English. If you write out a sentence such as, "William Wheeler was wheeling a one-wheeled wheelbarrow on the wharf when he saw a white whale in a whirlpool in the water", and then give it to a graduate of Columbia University to read, he will say: *William W'eeler was w'eelin' a one-w'eeled w'eelbarrow on the w'orf w'en he sore a w'ite w'ale in a w'irlpool in the waw-tuh*. Then he will look at you curiously and ask, *Wot's the pernt?*

It is a curious fact that most of the negroes in New York can pronounce the sound of *wh*, while the white people cannot. The colored people keep very much to themselves and their speech has not yet been contaminated by the white trash. On the whole their speech is much superior to that of the whites. Harlem is one part of the Big Town in which the English language is still spoken.

## II

So far I have mentioned only the differences between the systems of pronunciation of New Yorkese and English. There are, of course, scores of other words, supposed to be the same in both lingoes, which New Yorkers so mutilate that English-speaking people can hardly

recognize them. These words are mispronounced without a set rule or formula. Certain words are mispronounced by the ignorant everywhere, so, of course, we cannot condemn the ignoramuses of New Amsterdam for following a universal custom. We can, however, condemn the well-educated for mispronouncing words which are pronounced correctly by the very yokels they despise.

I have never met a graduate of New York University who knew how to pronounce the word *whoop*, nor a Montana cowpuncher who didn't. I doubt the existence of a graduate of City College who knows how to pronounce *exit*, or of an Idaho lumberjack who doesn't. I honestly believe that one could search Fordham from cellar to attic without finding a student who knew how to pronounce *cigarette*, and that one could ransack the asylums for the feeble-minded in the State of Washington without finding an inmate who didn't. A candidate for dog-catcher in any hick town in Kansas will begin his campaign speeches with the formula *ladies and gentlemen*, but the Ph. D's of Bagdad-on-the-Subway salute their audiences with *ladies and gentlemen*, or *ladies and gempmen*.

It is evident that New Yorkers

have a kind of mental complex which renders them unable to distinguish between good speech and bad. The members of the Board of Examiners have observed thousands of schoolteachers and have come to the conclusion that most errors of speech are the result of a kind of deafness or inaccuracy in listening to one's own, or another's spoken language. From time to time the newspapers print articles to the effect that hundreds of applicants for positions as schoolteachers are being rejected on account of their atrocious speech. It seems incredible and tragic that a person who had enough brains to be otherwise eligible should spend all the time and money necessary to go through a normal school only to find upon graduation that he had a disqualifying speech defect. He does not notice his phonetic failings because he is speech deaf. His teachers do not notice them either, because, I suspect, they are also speech deaf.

There are, of course, New Yorkers who try to speak better "English" than the masses and try to make their speech "distinctive". Of these the vast majority keep on mangling the language as much as before, start saying *eye-ther* and *nigh-ther* for *either* and *neither*,

and let it go at that. Those who adopt these Cockneyisms are seldom of the educated classes. Usually they are ignoramuses who find themselves, for various reasons, obliged to speak in public — salesmen, radio announcers, and shop-girls. They are not in the least discouraged when told that saying *eye-ther* for *either* is like saying *eye-ch* for *each*.

To those of us who have sensitive ears, and are resident but not native New Yorkers, its speech is the town's most unpleasant feature. We can endure the din of the El, but the mysterious sounds that sally forth from the native larynxes give us ear-aches. To avoid them and to overcome their effects, many of us go to heroic lengths. I often hear one of my fellow sufferers say that he was never particularly fond of moving pictures until he came to the Big Town; but now he goes to them frequently — avoiding the pictures in which the actors are Limeys or ex-Broadway stars because of their pansy pronunciations — solely for the pleasure of hearing decent English instead of bastard New Yorkese for a change. We agree that even the speech of the cast of an "Our Gang" comedy is very soothing after a day spent listening to the infernal jargon of New York.

# WE ARE NOT POOR

BY ETHEL AMBLER HUNTER

IN A COUNTRY where everyone worries frenziedly about the Depression, like a puppy with a bone too big for it, and where the doleful refrain of "these hard times" echoes from every street corner and bridge table, it might be well to look our poverty in the face and see of what it is made. If it bids fair to be permanent — an "equalitarian destitution", as William Church Osborn has called it — we must, I think, plan how we can manage to endure it.

Nothing is more demoralizing to the character of a nation or an individual than self-pity; and right now this country seems to be drenched in self-pity. The fact, however, that a large part of our population is considerably better off than the entire populations of most other countries seems to suggest that all is not yet lost, that perhaps we are not so unfortunate as we think. At least it is true that we have no need for many of the things we crave — some of them are actually bad for us — and, in comparison with other peoples and

other times, we certainly are not poor. Of course I except those on the very edges of the pit: the wandering youths thumbing their way around the country from one job to another; the inmates of cellars and flop-houses; the desperate fringes of society. But the great majority of the 130,000,000 of us, especially those who were well off in 1929 when dividends were large and salaries generous, are not poor — not in the true sense of the word, which is destitution.

We *are* poor in the sense of want — we want everything the other fellow has, and if we cannot have it we loudly cry poverty. Poverty is the prevailing excuse for every evasion of debt and duty, used when hard, unpleasant work is offered or when the time comes to contribute to funds for churches, community chests, and hospitals. For example, a young couple in our neighborhood recently asked their landlady to reduce the rent of their house. The landlady was old, ill, and wholly dependent upon the rents of her two small properties;