

The King might shudder if he could hear today's speech **by Sonya Maybury – June 2011**

It won four Oscars this year. It celebrates a king's triumph in overcoming his speech impediment with the help of a maverick, Australian speech therapist. Yes, *The King's Speech* is on everyone's lips. But it is the Queen's English in the mouths of today's presenters and public figures that assaults my ears.

The USA may be partly to blame. Look at the evidence. Our own Prime Minister, about to address the US Congress, was referred to as Ju-LEAH Gil-LARD, with the emphasis clearly on the wrong syllables.

Other worrying examples of American pronunciation popping up in our media include cere-MOANY for CERE-mony and neck-LACE for NECK-lace. And then there is an Indian influence at large. You may hear IT professionals discussing spread-SHEETS in their work-PLACE.

Of course, we are a multi-cultural society and we tolerate diversity. We are very different from the French who have tried to keep their language pure. But now English has displaced French as the language of diplomacy and become the world's business language, too. Vive l'anglaise!

But I digress. Perhaps the most irritating trend in today's slow murder of the English tongue is the elevation of lowly prepositions TO the status OF key words in news broadcasts. For example: 'showers are expected IN Sydney today' or 'all the Rugby World Cup games scheduled FOR Christchurch will now be played IN Auckland.' The key words are SYDNEY, CHRISTCHURCH and AUCKLAND, surely.

Along with prepositions, articles, 'a', 'an' and 'the', are being given undue emphasis, thereby stealing the limelight from their accompanying nouns. For example: 'Julia Gillard is THE Prime Minister of Australia.' There is only one PM, so Julia is (currently) the PRIME MINISTER of Australia.

Without putting emphasis on key words – rather like using a highlighter pen on text – English speech would be monotonous, of course, but the emphasis must be on the appropriate words.

Careless speakers routinely collapse syllables in multi-syllable words. You will hear Australia lose its 'A' and become 'stralia' or gov-ern-ment become 'guv-ment'. It is lazy, laid-back speech and culprits should be pun-ishe-d ap-pro-pri-ate-ly!

But I want to end on an historic note - recently pronounced 'his-STORE-ic' by a pretty, young presenter. It is the famous exit line from *Gone with the Wind*. As Rhett Butler walks out on his wife Scarlett he remarks: 'Frankly, my dear, I don't GIVE a damn!' That emphasis sounds wrong today. We tolerate occasional expletives – never gratuitous, of course – in films. But the film director had to conform to the socially acceptable language of the time. Consequently, Clark Gable was required to play down the natural emphasis on 'damn' and put it on 'give' instead.

I rest my (lower) case.

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