

“A Peculiar Language” — Early Australian English and Beyond*

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The early English-speaking settlements in Australia represented a dialectal “melting pot” of southeast England, Ireland and Scotland (in order of strength of input), with a hefty dollop of London English. The description “a peculiar language” comes from Edward Wakefield’s *A Letter from Sydney* (1829). Wakefield describes how “terms of slang and flash are used, as a matter of course, everywhere, from the gaols to the Viceroy’s palace, not excepting the Bar and the Bench”. Clearly, the Australian attachment to the vernacular goes back a long way, but the puzzle has always been to explain the particular features, especially of accent, that went on to thrive in the new variety. This talk looks at evidence from the 19th century — a crucial time and place for the formation of this postcolonial dialect. While no recordings of the speech from this time are available and reliable written evidence is scarce, we are lucky to have a collection of ‘verbatim’ police reports from the 1850s. Court reporter Charles Adam Corbyn’s vignettes of life and language give us a rare glimpse of the linguistic input from the Englishes that were around during that decisive period. When we read his words, we hear directly from the “melting pot”. What is striking about Corbyn’s reproductions is the curious potpourrie of different dialect features shown by individual speakers. Their language was distinctive and the physical separation from other English-speaking regions has since allowed this distinctiveness to flourish. While regional variation within Australia is still minor compared to other varieties, with time local differences have been increasing. The separation of urban and rural communities currently looks to be inspiring the some of richest regional diversity. Moreover, varieties of Aboriginal English and migrant English varieties are providing vibrant new dimensions to the language.

1.0 Historical Backdrop

The arrival of English in Australia coincides with establishment in 1788 of the first British penal colony in Sydney. Isolated coastal settlements then sprang up in Tasmania, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. The first arrivals were largely prisoners, prison officers and their families. Free settlers, didn’t reach significant numbers until the middle of the following century.

Table 1. Population of New South Wales (taken from 1828 census figures)

Type	Number
Convicts	15,668
Ex-convicts (pardoned or freed)	7,530
Adults born free	3,503
Adults arrived free	4,121
Children under 12	5,780

According to Nicholas and Shergold (1988), the birthplace records of around 20,000 convicts transported to New South Wales (1817-40) suggest the majority originated in “the heartland of England” (overwhelmingly Middlesex and Warwickshire) and eastern Ireland (with around a quarter from Dublin alone).

* Based on “A peculiar language”: The linguistic evidence for early Australian English, in R. Hickey (ed) *Varieties in Writing: The written word as linguistic evidence*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Trudgill (2004) identifies a number of stages in the dialect's formation: Stage 1 (the speech of the first settlers, showing rudimentary levelling and elimination, through accommodation, of minority features); Stage 2 (the speech of first generation of native born settlers, characterized by considerable inter- and intra-speaker variability) and Stage 3 (the speech of the second generation of native born settlers, with mixing, levelling, unmarking and reallocation, focused to produce an identifiable, stable, new dialect)¹.

2. Written texts as evidence for early Australian English

Charles Adam Corbyn reported for two papers — a sporting weekly *Bell's Life in Sydney* and a newspaper the *Empire*. In 1854 he published a selection of his reports with the long title *Sydney revels (the eighteen-fifties) of Bacchus, Cupid and Momus; being choice and humorous selections from scenes at the Sydney Police Office and other public places, during the last three years*. This work was republished by Cyril Pearl in 1970 — he added reports from *Bell's Life in Sydney* (taking the collection up to 1859).

For additional insights into what might lie behind Corbyn's transcriptions, I have also referred to Benjamin Suggitt Nayler (1796-1875). This, *Commonsense Observations on the Existence of Rules (not yet reduced to System, in any Work extant) regarding the English Language*, has been described by Kirsop (2006: 25) as “the most substantial of his Australian writings” and it is useful for the occasional light it can shed on the English spoken in Australia at this early time².

3. Sydney's lawbreakers and lawmakers of the 1850s

Corbyn's court reports contain 16 individuals of Irish background, and one clear example of a speaker of Scottish origin. On the basis of information hidden in the extracts, there are 5 probable London origin speakers. The background of the other 35 individuals, unfortunately, remains a mystery. There are undoubtedly a number of ‘currency lads and lasses’ among these (in other words, first generation of native born, contrasting with the *sterlings* or “immigrants”)³ But we can't be sure.

(a) Irish background speakers

The following are the non-standard linguistic features gleaned from the language of these speakers. Some of them are distinctly Irish English; some are more widespread — but most interesting of all, are those that have never been noted as Irish English. These anomalous features have been asterisked.

¹ Schneider (2007) proposes that there is a shared underlying process driving the formation of the postcolonial Englishes, but sees these as variously shaped by the social, cultural and political background at the time. He identifies a sequence of 5 stages that characterize the development of transportation varieties such as AusE: Phase 1 (foundation: dialect mixture and koineisation); Phase 2 (exonormative stabilization: a “British-plus” identity for the English-speaking residents); Phase 3 (nativization: the emergence of local patterns); Phase 4 (endonormative stabilization: “Australian self-confidence” and codification) and Phase 5 (differentiation — the birth of new dialects).

² I am extremely grateful to Wallace Kirsop. Not only did he alert me to the existence of Nayler and his prescriptive endeavours, but, in an act of extreme kindness, also lent me an edition (now very rare) of Nayler's *Commonsense Observations*.

³ There is a telling exchange in one of Corbyn's reports between the police magistrate and the solicitor Mr Johnson: “What!” exclaimed Mr. Johnson, “do you call England abroad? I always considered England at home.” “That's a matter of opinion,” retorted the Police Magistrate, “you may call it at home, but we Currency lads call it abroad, and this our home.” (p. 97).

Phonology

- 1) raising of /e/ to /ɪ/ (especially preceding nasals) as in *gintleman* for *gentleman*, *recolick* for *recollect*; also raising of /ʌ/ to /ɪ/ in *jist* for *just*; *sich* for *such*⁴
- 2) lowering of /i:/ to /e:/ as in *paceable* for *peaceable*; *baste* for *beast*
- 3) lowering of /ɔ:/ to /a:/ as in *darter* for *daughter*
- 4) lowering of /ɒ/ to /a/ as in *hanner* for *honour*, *sasingers* for *sausages*, *becase* for *because*
- 5) lowering of /e/ to /a/ before /r/ as in *warn't* for *weren't*
- 6) diphthongization before velar /ŋ/ as in *ould* for *old*, *houlds* for *holds* [“grips”]
- 7) some evidence of raising of /æ/ to /ɛ/ as in *ketch* for *catch*⁵
- 8) unstressed vowel/syllable deletion as in *'gainst* for *against*, *cept* for *except*
- 9) evidence of weak vowel differences (Wells 1982: 167) in dialect spellings like *purlitest* for *politest*, *pisthill* for *pistol*, *sathis-waxshan* for *satisfaction* [these spellings suggest [ɪ], [ə], or perhaps [ʌ]]
- 10) one case of reduction of final /o, ou/ to /ə/ in *widder* “widow” [not confined to Irish]
- 11) monophthong [o:] in GOAT vowel as in *provooke* for *provoke* [or is this [u:]?]
- 12) lowering and unrounding of /ʊ/ to /ʌ/ reflected in the irregular preterite form *mistuck* for *mistook* [this might be a hypercorrection]
- 13) possible evidence of rhotacism (the Irish “rough, harsh” /r/; cf. Naylor 1869) in different representations of vowels before /r/ as in *shouldur* for *shoulder*
- 14) dentalisation of /t-/d/ before /r/ as in *murthered* for *murdered*; *crathur* for *creature*
- 15) occasional fricativization of /t/ as in as in *sathis-waxshan* for *satisfaction*, *sthone* for *stone* [*sthone* might also be evidence of dentalization of /t/ after /s/; see feature 14]
- 16) fortition of alveolar/dental stop /θ/-/ð/ to /t/-/d/ as in *everyting* for *everything*; *dat* for *that*
- 17) high back vowel /u/ before /r/ as in *shure* for *sure*
- 18) final devoicing (especially after sonorants) as in *kilt* for *killed*
- 19) cluster simplification as in *fren* for *friend*, *recolick* for *recollect*, *arter* for *after*; *allers* for *always* [not confined to Irish, but widely attested in English dialects]
- 20) metathesis of /sk/ as in *ax* for *ask*, *axked* for *asked* [widespread across English dialects]
- 21) palatalization of /s/ word finally, as in *dish* for *this*, *countenansh* for *countenance*, *muderoush* for *murderous* (Hickey 2005: 191 attributes it to the influence of the palatal /sʲ/ of the Irish language)
- 22) single example of /w/ substitution for /f/ as in *sathis-waxshan* for *satisfaction* (Hickey suggests (pers. com.) that Corbyn here is using <w> to depict the [ϕ] of the Irish language speakers at that time, or those early immigrants in contact with these people)
- 23) /w/-/v/ merger as in *wiolence* for *violence* and *vorm* for *worm*, *Janivary* for *January* (a stereotypical trait of Cockney English; Hickey 2004b: 45 has found [v] for [w] substitution in early Irish texts, attributing it to Irish interference)
- 24) *H-dropping as in *'urt* for *hurt*, *'usband* for *husband*
- 25) *H-hypercorrection as in *hinnercent* for *innocent*, *Han* for *Anne*, *pisthill* for *pistol*
- 26) *NG-hypercorrection as in *hevings* for *heavens*, *roaming* for *Roman*, *orphing* for *orphan*
- 27) *INK-substitution (i.e. /ŋk/) for final /ŋ/ in quantifying pronouns as in *notink* for *nothing*

⁴ This general raising was typical of Irish English up to the late nineteenth-century after which it receded, see Hickey (2008) for further discussion.

⁵ Raising of the ASH vowel, especially after velars, was also present in colloquial British English already in the eighteenth century as noted by prescriptivist commentators such as Thomas Sheridan and John Walker, see Sheridan (1781) and Walker (1791)

Grammar and discourse

- 1) invariant use of verbal *-s* inflection as in *I sends; you seems*
- 2) shift of strong verbs over to the weak as in *cumed* for *came*
- 3) irregular preterite forms such as *mistuck* [possible phonological explanation under 12]
- 4) possessive *me* in place of *my*
- 5) negative concord as in *it's not saying notink at all, at all, I am; he's never bit nobody yet*
- 6) non-standard relative particle *as* as in *I'm a widder woman, as has buried two 'usbans*
- 7) second person plural forms *ye/yer*
- 8) IT-clefting as in *It's a murthering kind of gintilmin is Mither Christie*
- 9) subordinate *and* as in *yer an hinnercent gal, Mary Han, and expects to be married*
- 10) *progressive *a + ing* as in *a-talking* [a widespread early dialectal feature]

Surprising grammatical omissions from Corbyn's Irish dialogues are the "hot news" perfective *be after* [VERB]-*ing*. E.g. *Now go a head, old'un, if you've got any more questions to be arter axing me, as time's precious*. Also missing are signs of the infinitival marker *for-to* and sentence final discourse marker *but* (another putative Irish input into AusE; cf. Horvath 1980: 39).

Lexicon

- 1) *ball* [< ball of malt] "whiskey" [Irish English slang]
- 2) *O! hone* [< ochone] "oh", "alas" [largely Irish and Scottish]
- 3) *gossoon* "boy" [garçon] [chiefly Irish English]
- 4) *polthoge* "thump, punch" [Irish English slang]
- 5) *sasingers* [< sassage/sausages] [*sassage* is general English slang; however, the vowel in the version *sasinger* would suggest Irish]
- 6) *at all, at all* [Irish English]
- 7) *mortal* [< mortal] [not confined to Irish English]
- 8) *terrestrial* [< terrestrial; after celestial?] [not confined to Irish English]
- 9) *tater* [< pertater, potato] [widespread across dialects]
- 10) *in course* [< of course] [widespread across dialects]
- 11) *by the hokey* [a mild oath, not confined to Irish English]
- 12) *widder* [< widow] [see phonological explanation above; not confined to Irish English]
- 13) *whopper* "a great lie" [slang]
- 14) *That's very like a whale* "That's preposterous" [slang]
- 15) **stand* "shout, pay for (a drink, a treat)" [colonial slang]
- 16) **nobbler* "a measure of spirits; the glass in which this is served" [colonial slang]
- 17) **lushington* "drunkard" [colonial slang]
- 18) **arguify* [argufy] [colloquial/dialectal formation on *argue*; not recorded for Irish English]
- 19) **trap* "constable, thief-taker" [cant]
- 20) **fun* "to cheat, hoax" [cant]

Assault [Margaret O'Brien, I-6]

Mrs O'Brien ["a rather formidable looking dame"], Mary Anne Walsh ["a middling aged spinster"]
 "On Monday night," quoth Mrs O'Brien, "my blessed husband went to St **Pathrick's** a'cos '**tis a taytotaler he is**. I **sends** my **darter arter** a pound and a-half of pork **sasingers jist** to have reddey '**gainst** ["in time for"] he **cumed** home, for that **taytolling** work **allers** makes him mortal hungry; when that **baste** of a woman as **his** huffing and blowing afore the Court, hits my **darter**, who screeches, and out I **runs**. I **axked** her in **purlitest** terms the **raison** of her

wiolence, when she ups with this **sthone**, runs **arter** me, and just as I **gets** into my own door, she sends it **arter** me. If it had only hit me, I should not have been here to tell the tale.”

Mr Cory: Now, Marm, I ask you again, have you got any witness, and what’s her name?

Mrs O’Brien: She’s a **famale**, and her name is **Lizzibith**. [...]

Mr Cory [...] called Miss Mary Anne Walsh [...]

“I **seed**,” quoth Mary Anne, “all the row on Monday evening. Mrs O’Brien came to Mrs Callaghan’s, who told her **as how** she wasn’t wanted, and she chucked a big stone at Mrs Callaghan **houldin** the blessed **babbie** in her arms at the time, and Mrs Callaghan **never** flung **anythink** at all, but only says she, ‘**murther!** I’m **kilt!**’”

Mrs O’Brien: **Hevings** forgive you, Mary **Han**, for telling **sich** a **whopper**; **yer an hinnercent** gal, Mary **Han**, **and** expects to be married; **Hevings** forgive you!

Ancient Pistol [Patrick M’Grath, I-2]

Patrick M’Grath [“a Bardolpheian-shaped mass of humanity”]

Pat M’Grath deposed: I’m Postmaster general of Burwood, and **dat ould gintilmin** came to me, **wild** [wild/with?] **murther** written in his **countenansh**. **Ricolick**, says he, **dish pisthill’s** loaded, and by **de** tails of **me** coat I’ll lodge **de contints** in **yer** big thick carcase.

Mr Dowling: Are you afraid of him, that he will do you some bodily harm?

Paddy M’Grath: **Is it afraid ye mane**; **shure** and I’m in a **mortal** fear. Look at his **countenansh**; it’s plain to **percave** the **muderoush intinshins**.

Mr Dowling: Do you bear him any malice?

Paddy M’Grath: **O! hone**, me bear malice! Not at all, only the **swatest** of loving kindness and friendliness. I’m the **paceablest crathur** on the **terrestrial** globe, but **it’s a murdering kind of gintilmin is Mister Christie!**

Mr Cory: Have you got a savage dog?

Pat M’Grath: What! My dog savage! Poor Faugh-a-ballagh savage! **Shure** and he’s **never bit nobody** yet; the civilest **crathur** of the canine genius in this **counthrey** or any other.

(b) Speaker of Scottish origin

Those features not recognizably Scottish have again been asterisked.

Phonology

- 1) /u/ in place of /au/ as in *doot* for *doubt*
- 2) lowering of /i/ to /e/ in both syllables of *Saydnay* for *Sydney*
- 3) raising to /i/ and /u/ before /r/ as in as in *theerfur* [also indicating rhotacism]
- 4) some evidence of weak vowel merger in dialect spellings like *posithun* for *position*
- 5) final consonant reduction as in *gie* for *give*, *na/dinna* for *not/do not*
- 6) *?devoicing of final consonant in *natif* for *native*
- 7) *dentalization of /t/ before /r/ as in *ensthruet* for *instruct* [also an Irish feature]
- 8) *?dentalization of /sj/ or /ʃ/ as in *posithun* for *position* [this is a curious form which perhaps is meant to indicate a lack of palatalization; the dental substitute is unexpected]

Grammar and Lexicon

- 1) second person plural pronoun *ye*
- 2) *kenn* “know”
- 3) *gang* “to walk, go”
- 4) **mayhap* “perhaps” [English dialects, but nowhere evident in Scottish]

Wanted 1,000 Young Milliners for the Gold Diggings — Here's Some of 'Em

Mrs Melville [‘a mild looking young female, with an infant in her arms’]

Mr Nichols cross-questioned Mrs Melville, for so was the lady called, to try and shake her testimony, but she only shook her baby [...] At last, poor, poor, woman! she could no longer maintain her silence, but she said— “I’m **na a natif av Saydnay**, and **theerfur** am unable to **gie ye** the geographical **posithun av** Market-lane, but **mayhap ye ken** the Sheriff, and if **ye’ll** just **gang** to him I **dinna doot**, he’ll **ensthruct ye** as to the desirable spot”

(c) Speakers of London origin

The following features appear in the five London background speakers.

Phonology

- 1) H-dropping as in *ere* for *here*, *onor* for *honor*
- 2) H-hypercorrection as in *hinsted* for *instead*
- 3) final consonant deletion as in *lor* for *lord*
- 4) cluster simplification as in *Lunnon* for *London*
- 5) /w/-/v/ merger as in *werry* for *very* and *avay* for *away*
- 6) epenthetic final /t/ as in *sarmint* for *sermon*
- 7) unstressed vowel deletion as in *nat’ral* for *natural*, *‘pon* for *upon*; *nuff* for *enough*
- 8) spelling pronunciations such as *sky-antiffic* for *scientific*, *feelosofers* for *philosophers*
- 9) lowering of /e/ to /a/ before /r/ as in *sarmint* for *sermon* [widespread across the dialects]

Grammar and Lexicon

- 1) irregular plurals such as *mices* for *mice*
- 2) invariant use of verbal –s inflection as in *I lodges*; *feelosofers calls it*
- 3) regularization of strong verbs such as *seed* for *saw*
- 4) non-standard subject concord of *be* as in *the postesses was safe*; *were hit a nugget*
- 5) non-standard singular form for *do* as in *mices does play*
- 6) progressive *a + ing* as in *a-having*
- 7) relative particle *as* as *that ere lady has thinks herself above the likes on me*
- 8) non-standard prepositions as in *hinsted on the bed* for *instead of the bed*
- 9) pleonastic expansion of *as* to *as how* [southern England]
- 10) *nob* “head”

The Snob Family [Thomas Hopkins L-3]

Mr Ninivan Stewart [“a long-nosed, lank-jawed, hypocritical-looking shoemaker, dwelling in Kent-street”] against Thomas Hopkins [“a miserable looking little wretch of a cobbler, inmate of the Stewart snob family”]

Tommy Hopkins: I **lodges** long on **muster** and mother Stewart, and I **seed** that **ere** lady **a getting hup** stares. I **wur** **‘pon** the bed, **a’having** a lie down, as his **nat’ral nuff** seeing **has** how master Stewart **vos avay**: cos, don’t **ye** know, **ven** the cats **avay**, the **mices does** play. That **ere** lady **has** thinks **hersel** above the **likes on** me, ups with the jug off the wash-hand stand, and lets fly, and smash goes the looking-glass; **lor** that **wur** a smash [...] **hinsted on** the jug catching her **hon** the **nob**, it smashes the glass to smithereens. **Hif Mussus** Bella **Stuvart** had stood fire, it might have smashed her **fizzonomy**, **hor vot** the **feelosofers** calls **hit**, but hid **woodn’t** have hit the looking-glass. I **knows as how** the lady meant the jug to hit **mussus**, and by her bobbing, the glass was smashed.

(d) Speakers of unknown background

Linguistic features are varied, often curiously distributed among speakers. Best represented are the features of London, or south-eastern generally, a good many suggestive of the speech of the Cockney lower classes; e.g H-dropping, H-hypercorrection, G-hypercorrection, /v/-/w/ merger, YOD-dropping, vowel reduction. Many speakers show a blend of dialect features. In grammar and accent they fluctuate between standard and non-standard forms; with vocab showing a mix of standard, colloquial, cant and dialectal forms.

The Young Idea A-Shooting [James Willock, Marianne Anderson, U-2, 3]

James Willock [“a little criminal, about 14 years of age”] charged with assaulting Marianne Anderson [“a little cocknosed maiden, age 13”] Marianne deposed that she was **a playing** at “fly-the-garter,” with some other young ladies, when the boy “heaved her down by a stone on the head”.

Police Magistrate: Now, Master Willock, have you any questions to ask the little girl?

Boy (grinning): I’ve a few. **Himprimiss, is yer** sure it **vos hi has** heaved the stone?

Little Maid: I’m positive.

Boy: **Ver’s yer** mark?

Little Maid: [...] Here’s my mark.

By: **Vot** sort of a stone **were hit has hi** heaved? **Were hit** a nugget, **hor a** ironstone, **hor a marvel?**

Little Maid: It was a stone, and it **hurted** me

Boy: [...] **Wor hit has big has** this?

Little Maid: It was a stone and a very hard one. You were standing by Reach’s fence.

Boy: It’s a **tarnal** story.

[...]

Boy: I **hasn’t** got **no blunt**; so I’ll take it out in bread and **vater**.

4. Whence Australian English? What Corbyn’s texts reveal

Corbyn’s linguistic ‘bitsers’ resemble the NZ findings (cf. Gordon et al 2004); they too offer support for Trudgill’s second stage of new dialect formation. They are also interesting for what they do not include. In addition to the missing Irish features, there are also several quintessential London / south-eastern features that never appear in the court reports:

•G-dropping

Corbyn has examples of NG-hypercorrection but none of G-dropping. Nayler (p. 83) is clear: “What I wish my readers clearly to understand, is this — that *not* to give “the ringing sound” at all, is *a defect* [not ‘runnin’; KB]; while, to give it on two consecutive syllables, is *a trespass* [‘bringin’ not ‘bringing’; KB]; it should neither be *overdone* nor *underdone*”.

•TH-fronting

Corbyn’s dialogues contain no examples where /f, v/ has substituted for /θ, ð/ [*fink* for *think*]. Nayler makes no comment on this pronunciation beyond it presenting a “formidable obstacle to Foreigners” (p. 76).

•R-dropping

In the first half of the 1800s, *r*-dropping was still stigmatized (Beal 2004: 156). Corbyn might well have indicated this in his spelling, but did not, suggesting that he was either unaware of it or that *r*-dropping wasn’t a good social indicator at the time.

• Australian Questioning Intonation

A striking prosodic feature of current-day AusE (and NZE) is ‘Australian Questioning Intonation’. This high rising contour on declarative clauses (especially common in narratives and descriptions) might well have its roots in Irish English (Horvath 1985: 39).

But it is not so much as the vagaries of pronunciation that hurt the ear of the visitor. It is the extraordinary intonation that the Australian imparts to his phrases. There is no such thing as cultured, reposeful conversation in this land; everybody sings his remarks as if he was reciting blank verse in the manner of an imperfect elocutionist. It would be quite possible to take an ordinary Australian conversation and immortalise its cadences and diapasons by means of musical notation. Herein the Australian differs from the American. (Desmond 1911: 15)

5 W(h)ither the Irish features?

If children in the new English-speaking settlements were choosing variants from all the different dialects they were immersed in — how do we explain the features they selected? Why did London English end up dominating? It was more than simply speaker numbers. Eye-witness accounts from the 19th century point out the considerable clout and magnetism of Cockney speakers at this time.

But what about the Irish? Given their numbers, it’s surprising how little of their accent survived. The explanation often given is the general antagonism towards the Irish and the accompanying low prestige of Irish varieties at this time. As Hickey (2004: 110) points out:

A lack of influence presupposes that the Irish community was easily identifiable and so easily avoidable in speech. It can be assumed that the language of rural immigrants from Ireland in the later eighteenth and during the nineteenth century was a clearly identifiable contact variety of Irish English and so its features would have been avoided by the remainder of the English-speaking Australian population.

The surviving features are largely confined to the broader vernacular varieties. The Irish had an important part in shaping the Australian self-image — and this is an image that has always been closely tied up with the vernacular.

The base language of English thieves is becoming the established language of the colony. Terms of slang and flash are used, as a matter of course, everywhere, from the gaols to the Viceroy’s palace, not excepting the Bar and the Bench. No doubt they will be reckoned quite parliamentary, as soon as we obtain a parliament. [...] Hence, bearing in mind that our lowest class brought with it a peculiar language, and is constantly supplied with fresh corruption, you will understand why pure English is not, and is not likely to become, the language of the colony. This is not a very serious evil; and I mention it only to elucidate what follows. [Edward’s Wakefield’s *A Letter*

The Irish English input to AusE involved variants that would have slipped under the prescriptive radar, either because they were never part of formal usage (*youse* and *fillum* for *film*) or because people simply didn’t notice them (epistemic *mustn’t* as in “He mustn’t be here yet’ and fricated /t^s/ as in *That’s a beautiful hat* [hæ t^s]).

6. In conclusion

There is no doubt that if we were lucky enough to have early recordings (like the New Zealanders do), our picture of 19th century AusE would be richer. Nonetheless, Corbyn had a talent for discerning dialect features and the vignettes of life and language in his published court reports give us a rare and fascinating insight into the linguistic “melting pot” of the Englishes that were around during that decisive period.

Finally, any discussion of AusE must also include mention of the burgeoning socially-defined variation. Multicultural Australia is seeing a flourishing of ethnocultural varieties (ethnolects). Contact with languages other than English is seeing the rise, particularly recently, of new multicultural identities for AusE in the form of migrant ethnolects. And of course varieties of Aboriginal English and creoles have been adding vibrant new socially relevant dimensions to the ‘Extra-territorial Englishes’ in Australia.

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