

20th October 2021

Dialects

“A Babylonish dialect.”

Hudibras, Samuel Butler 1663

In his infamous 17th century poem, *Hudibras*, Samuel Butler lampoons “Good Sir Knight”, and in one section, mocks him for the way he speaks.

*Else when with greatest Art he spoke,
You'd think he talk'd like other foke.
But when he pleas'd to shew't, his speech
In loftiness of sound was rich,
A Babylonish dialect,
Which learned Pedants much affect.*

A “Babylonish dialect”? Whether that’s high-brow, heavily accented, broad or simply different, I know just what he means. And while I don’t wish to lampoon anyone, I have been where Samuel Butler once stood.

I once took a Welsh colleague to a chip-shop in Glasgow. A drunk man was trying to persuade the Italian owner to sell him fifty-pence-worth of chips, when the cheapest portion was a seventy-five-pence bag. My friend watched open-mouthed, then whispered to me, “I *know* he’s talking English, but all I get is ‘fifty’ and ‘chips’.” A “Babylonish dialect”, perhaps?

There were two recurrent “speech-related” jokes in the hospice. The first was a nurse with a new patient. “Comfy?” she asks. “Dundee!” is the reply. “I come fae Dundee. An’ whaur de ye come fae yersel’, hen?” The second is an overseas doctor enquiring of a deaf, patient, “Did you come here to die?” “Oh no!” is the response. “I came here yesterday ...” Subtleties may be lost in these written versions. But have them spoken, in the right dialect, and you’ll get the jokes well enough.

Do dialects matter? Of course! Words, idioms, cadences, speech-patterns indicate a place of origin, a distinctiveness of which we should be proud. T S Elliot in *The Four Quartets* suggests that “speech impelled us to purify the dialect of the tribe”. I hope not, for the range of dialects we hear should help us praise the variety of our human species. Always provided, of course, that a drunk man in a Glasgow chip-shop doesn’t try to buy fifty-pence-worth of chips in a Babylonish dialect that even a patient Italian, far less a bemused Welshman, doesn’t understand!

A prayer for today

“Lord, speak to me, that I may speak, in living echoes of thy tone.” Amen

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