

The ever-evolving Aussie accent

How did “G’day mate” become the sound of home for millions of people?

THE ORIGINS of the Australian-English accent are veiled in myth and Aussie legend: from pollen levels being behind our nasal twang, to the idea that we mumble to stop flies entering our mouths. Now, a project called Australian Voices is listening to voice recordings and aiming to collect 1000 past and present Australian-English accents, to learn more about what’s behind the Australian drawl.

“Language is a marker of social identity and so people speak like the people they either aspire to be like, or want to be with,” says Dr Felicity Cox, an associate professor of linguistics at Macquarie University, Sydney. Felicity and her colleague, Dr Sallyanne Palethorpe, are the drivers behind Australian Voices.

A person’s accent changes slowly after their early teenage years, so voice recordings provide a snapshot of their origins, and information about their childhood social environment. This means that old recordings of elderly people are particularly interesting: listening to the voices of 1950s grandparents gives researchers such as far back as the 1870s. She also gets to hear some great stories. “A few of them talk about Ned Kelly, actually,” says Felicity. “One gentleman recounts a conversation with Ned Kelly’s sister in a pub.”

The Australian accent is famous for its vowel sounds, absence of a strong “r” pronunciation and the use of an inflection – or intonation – at the end of sentences, which can make statements sound like questions.

According to Felicity, the way vowels are pronounced is the most peculiar feature of Australian English. “There’s a story of a lady who was told she was going home ‘to die’,” recalls

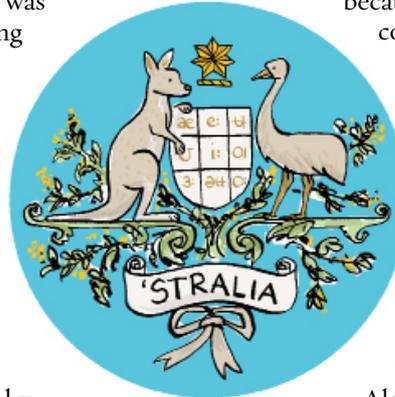
Felicity. “But what she was actually doing was going home ‘today’.”

Felicity believes the Australian accent began with the first Australia-born colonial children in Sydney in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. They’d have strengthened their bonds as a group by speaking in similar ways, in the same way today’s teens use language to form tribes. The early colonial children would have drawn on the many British accents spoken by adults around them to create their sound.

The timing of Australia’s settlement by Britain is another important factor in the modern Australian sound, says Felicity. Because the British-English accent has changed over time, different British colonies, such as the US, Canada and South Africa, have been founded on different versions of the British accent, and they have kept some of this flavour in their accents today. “Australian and New Zealand English are more similar to each other than to other British varieties because they were settled at a similar time by similar groups of people,” Felicity says.

Our modern accent is rare in that it doesn’t noticeably vary between Australian regions – although most Aussies reckon they can spot minor differences. “If you ask any Australian they say... ‘I can tell he is from Queensland, [or that] she is from Tasmania’,” says Bruce Moore, editor of the *Australian Oxford Dictionary*. “But it’s probably not true.”

The Australian accent has historically lacked regional variation



because although the communities began as isolated settlements, there was a great deal of internal migration, particularly from Sydney where the first accent began. Later, in the 20th century, a social separation of the accent occurred.

Alongside the general Australian accent, there emerged both a “cultivated” British-sounding Australian accent, and in reaction to that “posh” sound, a very broad “ocker” accent, Felicity says.

This 20th-century division of Australian English is largely absent from the accents of today’s young people, perhaps suggesting that linguistic change runs parallel with social change. This isn’t to say that the modern Australian accent is generic. Australian Aboriginal English is considered a dialect in its own right, and new, ethno-specific varieties of Australian English are continually emerging among migrant groups.

The most common fear people have about our accent is that it’s becoming more Americanised.

But Felicity says accents are remarkably resistant to change from factors such as the media, and as long as people want to be known as Australian, they will retain a distinctive Australian sound. “It will always remain a strong marker of national identity,” she says.

ALYCE TAYLOR

TO LISTEN TO some interesting audio clips of historic Aussie accents collected by the Australian Voices project at Macquarie University go to: clas.mq.edu.au/voices/past