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" 'I'm Not Sam!' ": Dialect, Phonetic Transcription, and Language Change in the Novels of Kingsley Amis

Mary K. Bolin  
2007

" 'And I happen to like the arts, you sam.'

"The last word, a version of 'see,' was Bertrand's own coinage. It arose as follows: the vowel sound became distorted into a short 'a,' as if he were going to say 'sat.' This brought his lips some way apart, and the effect of their rapid closure was to end the syllable with a light but audible 'm.' " (*Lucky Jim*: 51)

This well-known passage from Kingsley Amis's first novel, *Lucky Jim*, reinforces the reader's impression that the speaker, Bertrand Welch, is obnoxious, overbearing, and pretentious. The passage does more than illustrate something annoying about the character, however: it also shows the author's interest in language and his acute ability to observe and describe linguistic behavior. This ability is clear in this novel, published in 1954, and it remains clear through his forty-year career to his death in 1995.

### Kingsley Amis

Kingsley Amis was a native of London, born in 1922, Oxford-educated, and a veteran of World War II. Beginning with *Lucky Jim* in 1954, he produced a steady stream of comic novels until his death in 1995. His novels make striking, funny, and memorable use of language. As the careful transcription and explanation of Bertrand's idiosyncratic pronunciation illustrates, Amis was also interested in language and usage, and often uses linguistic habits or features to make a point (usually a negative one) about a character. His book, *The King's English: a Guide to Modern Usage*, is an updating of H.W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* and an homage to Fowler as well. Its title is a nod to a book of the same name written by H.W. Fowler and his brother, F.G. Fowler, in 1906 (as well as referring to "Kingsley" himself.) *The King's English* addresses vocabulary, pronunciation, style, variation, and change, and many of its entries could be illustrated by a quote from one of Amis's novels.

Amis makes no claims to be a linguist (or a "linguistician" as he sometimes puts it, perhaps because "linguist" is often used to mean "polyglot"), but this delightful passage from the introduction to *The Kings English* shows that his heart and head were in the right place:

"I am not a professional or even a trained linguist ... but I have found some linguistic terms and procedures useful. For this purpose I have many times consulted a volume inherited from my youth, *Language*, by Leonard Bloomfield ... Bloomfield was a major influence on the development of structural linguistics, I am told, and is now opposed by Noam Chomsky."  
(xiii)

### **Attitude toward Language Change**

Amis was clearly aware of language change, and of the processes of change, and his attitude veered between acceptance and irritation. The irritation seems to stem from a dislike of both crudeness and pretense. An entry from *The King's English* titled "Berks and Wankers" sums up these two ends of the continuum:

"...[M]ost users of English habitually distinguish between two types of person whose linguistic habits they deplore if not abhor ...

"Berks<sup>1</sup> are careless, coarse, crass, gross and of what anybody would agree is a lower social class than one's own. They speak in a slipshod way with dropped Hs, intruded glottal stops and many mistakes in grammar. Left to them the English language would die of impurity, like late Latin.

"Wankers<sup>2</sup> are prissy, fussy, priggish, prim and of what they would probably misrepresent as a higher social class than one's own. They speak in an over-precise way with much pedantic insistence on letters not generally sounded, especially Hs. Left to them, the language would die of purity, like medieval Latin...

"Most speakers ... try to pursue a course between the slipshod and the punctilious ... and this is healthy for them and the language." (23)

This passage sums up a great deal about use, change, variation, style, and certainly sums up the author's attitude as it is expressed in his novels: neither a berk nor a wanker be.

*The King's English* is alphabetically organized and includes entries on things like jargon and "imply and infer," as well as hypercorrection in grammar (e.g., "between you and I"). Amis is most observant about phonology and pronunciation, however, particularly about changes in those areas, noticing the rise of spelling pronunciations such as 'of-ten' rather than

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<sup>1</sup> The OED defines berk as "a fool" with examples dating from Amis's teenage years, the 1930s, giving its origin as "abbrev. of Berkeley (or Berkshire) Hunt, rhyming slang for cunt."

<sup>2</sup> This term is probably known to many Americans: "wank" = "masturbate," and by extension a wanker is "An objectionable or contemptible person." The OED definition does not really capture the implied "pretentious loser."

"offen," as well as the intrusive "h" in "forehead." (The pronunciation in British English was at one time generally "'forrid'" to rhyme with "horrid"— as in the poem about the little girl with the curl— but "fore-head," as is generally standard in American English has become more common in the UK, and Amis admits to having gone along with the tide on this one [*The King's English*: 172]).

### Dialect in Amis's Novels

A number of Amis's novels have some regional or geographic dialect content. Several of them are set in Wales and have examples of Welsh speech. A character in *That Uncertain Feeling*, for example, a young Welsh woman, says to her supervisor,

"Please, Mr. Lewis, there's a lady come into Reference to make an inquiry and she've been terribly rude. Awful, she've been, Mr. Lewis, honest." (3)

The Welsh dialect is indicated here with syntactic features only ("she've.") Amis's novels with American characters or setting have some American speech. In those cases, the dialect may be marked with phonology, syntax, or lexis. The main character of *I Want It Now*, a social-climbing British journalist, hears the following:

"Ah, Apollo jars. Arcane standard Hannah More. Armageddon pier staff." (53)

The British listener recognizes that "this was not what the man could really have said, not exactly. This was somebody talking to excite as much credence as he could in the native accents of Dixie." (53) We are not told whether the listener ever deciphers the meaning, "I apologize. I can't stand it anymore. I'm a-gettin' pissed off," or phonetically, approximately:

[a əpalədʒaz. əkeɪn stændəd hænə mɔə. aməʒeɪn piːstɔf.]

(To decode Amis's transcription accurately, one must take into account the r-lessness of both Amis's variety of British English and the Southern US speech being described.)

As for American syntax, in *One Fat Englishman*, a Danish-American woman says,

"'Oh, yes, we do have a sense of time, it's just that you didn't get around to appreciating it yet!'"

To which her Danish husband (a philologist!) replies,

" 'Do you hear that? Isn't it monstrous? ... 'Do have'—it's like something in Pope. And always the aorist tense instead of the perfect.' " (13)

This may show that Amis should stick to phonology. While he may be correct that a British speaker would say, "Oh yes we have got a sense of time," and that "do have" is found in American English, the "aorist tense" of "you just didn't get around to..." is a case in which most Americans would probably in fact say, using the perfect, "you just haven't gotten around to appreciating it yet."

Lexical variation is shown in this same novel by the title character's irritation at the American use of "turtle" to mean both sea turtles and land-dwelling animals that he calls "tortoises." (84) The "fat Englishman" of this novel is a British book publisher who is a sort of irascible fish-out-of-water in a 1960s American college town. Amis shows this discomfort and dissonance linguistically with exchanges such as that about the turtles/tortoises, as well as the character's ignorance of, or irritation with, 1960s American slang such as "grind" ("a young man who is very interested in his books ..." 165).

### Other Times and Places

Amis was a devotee of science fiction, and tried his hand at it a number of times. *Russian Hide and Seek* is set in a 20<sup>th</sup> century England that is part of the Soviet Union. *The Alteration* is similarly set in a 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe in which the Reformation never occurred. *The Alteration* uses linguistic features, among other things, to picture the world as it might be had the course of history been changed so significantly. While Europe remains dominated by the Catholic Church, North America is the country of New England, where Dutch-influenced Protestantism flourishes, and where English has been affected by French, Spanish, and Native American languages, as well as innovating and remaining conservative in ways that are different than the English of England. Hubert Anvil, a young English boy, asks Cornelius van den Haag, a visiting New England diplomat:

"'I notice you say you're in England since a year. That must be a New Englander expression, yes?'

"So it was, by van den Haag's account: one of a number of ways in which the speech of his nation had been affected by that of its French-speaking neighbour, Louisiana, whose Indians had turned out long ago to be peculiarly well fitted to serve as nursemaids to white children." (56)

Van den Haag's daughter later demonstrates for Hubert "how people talk in New England" by saying, "Copann a me, thart a precious honest

cooly, hoke. Kisahkihitin," showing French ("copann a me"), Native American ("Kisahkihitin," which is "I love you" in the Cree language), conservative features such as "thart" and so on (62). These "alternate worlds" co-exist with novels set in an earlier era, including *The Riverside Villas Murder* and *You Can't Do Both*. These last two are set in the 1930s, and have teenage characters who are Amis's contemporaries, who speak in a style faithful to the youth of that era.

## Twentieth Century Britain

In contrast to these are the large number of novels set in contemporary England, in the decade in which they were written. A number of these have "dialect" content, based not on geography or ethnicity, nor generally on gender, but in some sense on class, although not necessarily a distinct social class, since Amis's characters are virtually all middle to upper middle class. These dialect features nearly always mark a single character, and most often mark him (and it generally is "him") as annoying, phony, a berk or a wanker. Not only does Amis use these linguistic features to tell us something about the character, he is very consistent in transcribing them. Amis's characters also have other, non-verbal markers that identify them. Professor Welch has the "long-lived, wondering frown" that Jim Dixon dreads eliciting when he must ask or tell the professor something. Jenny Bunn, the protagonist of *Take a Girl Like You* identifies "stooges," one category in her typology of men, by such characteristics as crooking an index finger over the lock of a suitcase to keep it from flying open, and carrying change in a coin purse. The combination of verbal and non-verbal markers creates singular and memorable characters.

Bertrand Welch says "you sam" (a very clever description and transcription of something like [sæ<sup>m</sup>]) on page 51 of *Lucky Jim*. Thereafter, whenever his speech features a word ending in [æm] at the end of a sentence, his particular linguistic tic is present, e.g.:

"Primitive technique can't have any virtue in itself, obviouslam."

" ... we don't want to do that, do wam?" (100)

"I don't happen to be that type, you sam." (209)

(To which Jim Dixon, the "Lucky Jim" of the title, replies, "I'm not Sam, you fool.")

Amis's consistency in transcribing these features does not mean

that Bertrand says [æ<sup>m</sup>] instead of [i] in every open syllable. He does not say, "I don't happen to bam that type, you sam." Amis's accurate reproduction of these features includes the accurate reproduction of the environment they appear in. In an open syllable, [i] is lowered to [æ], nasalized, and, the open syllable is "closed" with [ᵐ]. As Amis describes it, "the vowel sound became distorted into a short 'a,' as if he were going to say 'sat.' This brought his lips some way apart, and the effect of their rapid closure was to end the syllable with a light but audible 'm.' " (*Lucky Jim*: 51). While [æ<sup>m</sup>] marks Bertand's speech as that of a pretentious bully, the phenomenon is not very different from that demonstrated by "yup" and "nope" for "yes" and "no." The closing of the lips after the high back vowel [ou] creates [nou<sup>ʔp</sup>], and [yɛs] becomes [yɛ<sup>ʔp</sup>] becomes [yΛ<sup>ʔp</sup>] through a similar process.

## Girl, 20

The novel that with perhaps the most pervasive and prominent "dialect" content is *Girl, 20*, published in 1971. Its narrator is the youngish-but-conservative music critic Douglas Yandell and the story's main character is the middle-aged-but-liberal musician and orchestra conductor Sir Roy Vandervane. Vandervane's speech expresses his desire to be contemporary, and should we wonder if he is linguistically sophisticated, Amis puts that to rest by having Vandervane enter the novel, singing:

"After a moment, a man's voice began loudly singing somewhere inside the house, the throat muscles tensed to produce the plummy effect often used in imitations of Welsh people, though this last was evidently not part of the singer's intention.

'Ah-ee last mah-ee hawrt een ahn Angleesh gawr-dan,

'Jost whahr that rawzaz ahv Angland graw ...'

"Most musicians have a poor ear for linguistic or verbal nuances ... but it was like Roy ... to take the trouble to substitute 'Angleesh' for the 'Eengleesh' that might have been expected, this subtly hitting at persons who pronounce the name of our nationality as it is spelt" (32-33).

Amis expresses himself elsewhere at length and with a sort of resigned disapproval on the subject of spelling pronunciation, seeing it as a force in contemporary language change, and as something at once pedantic and ignorant. (*The King's English*: 167-177). Roy Vandervane is something of an alter ego for Amis, sharing Amis's contempt for pretension and his "ear for linguistic or verbal nuances." This introduction to the character makes it all the more significant that Vandervane's primary verbal signature is his habit

of consonant cluster reduction and assimilation of nasals and stops. There are dozens of examples of this throughout the novel, associated with this character only:

"Moce people ..." (38)

"Moce chaps seem to prefer...' (38)

"... try not to be such an ole square ..." (39)

"... bloody Nongconformist propaganda ..." (45)

"One simply can't reach thack girl." (47)

"As the Post Office so helpfully reminds me on the cover of this foam book I've got here." (53)

"I'm giving her up. Cleam break." (53)

"Oh nothing im particular." (71)

"The food's nop bad, or wasn't." (99)

"I agree that things like pancy-curity can get me down." (147)

The last example takes decoding, as Amis's transcriptions sometimes do. "Pancy-curity" is "pants security." Vandervane is referring to his own practice of stockpiling underwear when he is getting ready to have one of his frequent extramarital affairs, and to the fact that his wife knows about this practice and that he has to hide it from her as well as trying to hide the affair. The obscurity of the expression "pants security" and Amis's consistency in depicting the character's linguistic habit add to the prominence that this habit has in depicting the character.

Amis was aware of the phonological process of assimilation, in which "clean break" becomes "cleam break." He defines it in *The King's English*, and makes his attitude toward it clear:

*"Assimilation.* Making one sound more like another, usually the one that follows. For instance, the word impossible started life as a combination of two words of which the first was *in* meaning *not*, but the *n* became *m* by assimilation.

"Uneducated speech in London and elsewhere is full of assimilations, and



the tendency is probably on the increase. I cannot clearly remember hearing somebody talk about a dime breed more than ten or twenty years ago" (253-254).

Presumably Amis accepted the assimilation of "impossible" even if he could not accept "cleam break" or "im particular." While he disapproved of assimilation as an innovation, in his view a berkish one, his disapproval of spelling pronunciations (the "h" in "forehead," the stressed vowel in "my," and so on) shows disapproval of an innovation that is more precise and pedantic, and therefore, in his view, something for wankers. Several of the examples above ("nop bad," "thack girl") show a glottal stop as well as, or rather than, assimilation. Amis has a long, entertaining polemic against the spread of the glottal stop, saying, among other things, "[U]nnecessary glottal stopping seems an example of headlong pedantry, especially when associated ... with affectations like sounding all one's H's regardless of emphasis" (*The King's English*: 178). While he deplores the intrusion of the glottal stop as an alternative to the hypercorrect "r" of "lawr and order," he seems also to deplore it in the "sloppy," speech of "nop bad" (i.e., [nɑ? bæd]), making it difficult for the speaker to navigate between berk and wanker and gain Amis's approval.

Amis's expressed views on assimilation make its purpose as a feature of Roy Vandervane's speech an obvious one. Vandervane is not uneducated, and his adoption of "uneducated" speech habits express his desire to be young, hip, and so on. In addition, Vandervane, like his creator, hates pretense, and his attempts at more vernacular speech express that as well.

Roy Vandervane's urge to be groovy and happening may have a number of motivations, but chief among them is the object of the underwear stockpiling, his latest girlfriend, Sylvia. This nineteen-year-old gives Bertrand Welch a run for his money in being obnoxious and objectionable, and like Bertrand, her speech goes a long way in making her a character we love to hate. Sylvia's first utterance introduces us to her particular speech pattern:

" 'What a terribly nice fluht,' she said, using the then fashionable throaty vowel." (63)

Her subsequent dialogue is consistent:

" 'Christ, what's the muhtter with you.' " (98)

" 'Darling, it was all an uhct. Surely you could see thuht?' " (63)

Like Roy Vandervane, Sylvia is upper-class and educated, and, like him, perhaps with more authenticity or success, she is expressing her oh-so-

60s hipness in the way that she speaks. The author is also expressing his contempt for her in having her speak this way. Not that the raising and centralizing of /æ/ to /ʌ/ should excite contempt, but this feature of Sylvia's speech is clearly part of what the author finds irritating about her, along with her tiny head and curtain of lank hair. Amis was aware of the shift from /æ/ to /ʌ/ as a feature of British speech in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and refers to it in *The King's English* in the section devoted to "Pronunciation as they broadcast it."

"Young broadcasting performers, prominent performers, regular performers exercise a powerful influence on how the rest of us speak, an influence more immediate than that of courtiers, ecclesiastics, academics, or any other dominant group of the past. Modern broadcasters do not of course speak with one voice, but by listening to them it is an easy matter to form an image of how the pronunciation of our language may be changing, perhaps irreversibly.

"When one of us today hears a recording ... of speech from before the last war, it sounds old-fashioned in a number of ways ... In particular, the pronunciation of several easily-differentiated vowel sounds seems to be not as it was. ...

"... The sound of short A is now closer to what used to be short U (as in *but*.) A broadcaster now seems to talk about 'the impact of bluck's attacks on other blucks in parts of Africa.' " (169)

The implication is that courtiers, ecclesiastics, and academics might have been better influences than newsreaders are. The other implication is that "easily-differentiated vowel sounds" are being sloppily confused by berks. Amis goes on to describe the shift of /ɛ/ to /æ/ and the shift of /ʌ/ to /ɛ/. He does not show any awareness that this is a change to the system, a system-preserving push chain, one that could have started with /ɛ/ to /æ/, which would have pushed /æ/ to /ʌ/ which then would have pushed /ʌ/ to /ɛ/. The only part of this chain that is noted in Sylvia's speech is the shift from /æ/ to /ʌ/.

## Conclusion

Amis's views on language and his ability to influence depict and evaluate characters through their use of language are one of the things that make him such a wonderful writer. His ability to imaginatively and accurately transcribe what he has heard (and deplored) make it clear that a character is speaking a dialect or variety of English. Amis draws attention to this through his transcription and the implicit evaluation of the speech that goes along with it. He clearly was not a "linguistician," and gets some things wrong, especially syntactically and lexically in his depiction of Americans, for

example. In depicting phonology, however, he is cranky but generally brilliant. The accuracy of his transcription draws attention to variation between English in the US and the UK, and heightens awareness of changes-in-progress and of the things our linguistic habits may show about us. In the case of the changes-in-progress, we see things that from this side of the Atlantic and this side of 1970 are unremarkable, but which to Amis were somewhere on a continuum from silly to abhorrent.

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