



In the Vernacular

Waiting for the long overdue bus, the two of them kept talking, as if that would keep them warm. Beyond Savacentre car park the Rowley hills panorama looked marvelous and smoky in the twilight but they failed to admire its rugged winter beauty. They were concerned with other matters. Some might say they were blaberen. One was perched on the bus shelter seat, the other waved his metal walking stick down the road.

– Wheer’s that bus got to? Yow’d think it wus gooin’ rahnd the werld, visiting the lost tribes of the Amazon or summat.

– Yow’m right theer. Yow get on a bus these days and it’s lairke travelin’ wi Cap’n Cook, gooin’ wheer no mon had gone befower.

– Yow got that wrung, cocka. ‘E wor the fust to get theer. Theer was some other bugger theer befower ‘im. I’d be the fust ter admit it if ‘e got theer fust but ‘e was just the fust white bloke.

– So what yow’m saying is that ‘e wuz just the Gaffer that SAID ‘e discovered it.

– Ar, I am. I ai coddin. And then ‘e went to the papers abaht it, and yow cor believe everything they write theer. Think abawt it, if the Phoenicians ‘ad papers they might have told us they discovered Tipton, well before the Normans came. Now I know there wuz people them days gooin’ all ways in reed boats an it may be they did come up the canal. I dai say they got theer, but yow can bet they gi’ it a damn good try!

– They was travellin’ all abaht the place in them days, like tinkers, selling their wares left roight and centre. Lairked their nomadin’, dai they? Agooin’ ‘ither and thither, not botherin’ no-one, tattin’ an’ what have you. It was them Danes mekkin all the trouble, pillaging and pinching.

– If yow want my opinion, them Ancients, before Christ lairke, were damn clever. They wor backerds. Tek the Pyramids! Barrett Homes cor build lairke that, con they? What I want to know is who paid ‘em?

– Probably dai get paid. Gaffer probably legged it mate!

– Yow cor fault the werkmanship though. They med ‘em to last, dai they? Yow dow see that kind of werkmanship today. Tek the Council House over theer. It’s lairke a bloody big Pizza Hut, ai it?

– Yow’m lucky they dai put up a big tin bucket with ‘oles in it, mek it all modern and shiny.

– Modern means summat that dai werk proper, if yow ask me.

– Yow come to think abaht it, tek the Middle East... they was all nomads. I mean, there was settlements lairke, but they moved from plerce t’ plerce, dai they? They enjoyed that way of loife, traipesin’ all over. Now, they’m all in cities and to my mind that’s half the trouble now. On top another, all up anunst each other, no room to breathe. No wonder they want to get out and abawt agin.

– Yow’m roight theer. Now wheer’s that bloody bus?

– Misbehavin’, that’s wheer it is...

I wasn’t ‘alf cut, I swear it. These two could have been a contemporary manifestation of those local mythical comedy characters, Aynuk and Ayli. Now, it was their banter starting me thinking about the ways migrants both alter our sense of identity and how they influence the language we use. A few people have noted, that Tory true blue hero Sir Winston included, that if we travelled back 1500 years in these islands we wouldn’t find English spoken here at all. All because our language adapts to societal and environmental change over time. Some words fall out of use entirely when the activity that gave rise to them is no longer practiced. So, in Black Country dialect, you could find words that used to be associated with farming and agriculture - [nizgul](#), the smallest of a litter of pigs or brood of chickens, or [lade-gorn](#) - a wooden pail with a long handle to throw water out (from Anglo Saxon [laeden](#) - to throw out), [lezzer](#) meaning meadow; or all those words that arose from the industrial landscape, such [glede](#), [tacky bonk](#), [work ‘uss](#), [miskin](#) (a variable of [midden](#)), that only an older generation will recall.

I’m of the mind that the type of language we use and the way we speak it can be used to both deceive or to demean, to determine our class and therefore station in life. There’s this idea that the vernacular is sub-standard, although regional accents and dialect are often used as a staple of comedy, something to be celebrated - but there’s a fine line between being laughed at and laughing with. In 2007 that fine Scottish writer A.L. Kennedy (and stand up comic to boot) won the Costa Book Prize for her novel ‘Day’, which told the story of an Lancaster bomber tail gunner who hails from Wednesbury. With her own grandparents coming from the Black Country, she said she was drawn to the strange dialect and who can blame her. “There’s an enormous sense of humour in the way Black Country people speak,” she said. “It’s a very playful and very old language.”

Not everyone agrees. I came across one Twitterer who wrote: ‘Heard a woman on the train earlier her Black Country accent was that thick she sounded Ukrainian’. He didn’t care much for people from Leamington Spa and Kenilworth either, stating all they want to do all day is ‘read Gardeners Weekly and eat Victoria sponge #timewasters’. He was a Villa fan.

You might remember that Tommy Mundon, a popular local comedian. By day, he was a lorry driver for Dudley council, by night a master of dialect humour. Back in the 1970’s he submitted an audition video to ‘The Comedians’, a groundbreaking stand-up show on ITV. Their producer told him: ‘You’re a very good comic, but I’m wondering whether your accent will go down outside the West Midlands.’ Frankly, he dai understand what he wuz on abawt. Tommy’s surname gives us some clues to the source of his accent, coming from a combination of [Munda](#), an Anglo-Saxon personal name (meaning a man of strength), and [denu](#), valley - thus Munda’s valley. His ancestors were foreign. As the men at the bus stop might say: ‘E’s from off.

As am I, strictly speaking, being as I was born in West Bromwich. But I don’t have a particularly broad accent. I moved about a bit. When I worked on the south coast as a young man, fellow workers asked me if I came from Scotland. They were convinced that the Black Country was much further north than I claimed. By my reckoning, my own accent is softened by my lineage; one side of the family coming from Offaly and Connemara in Ireland, the other

lot drifting down from North Wales to Cheshire, to the Potteries to Darlaston, in search of work. And that's the rub, isn't it. We go in search of werk, hard and poorly paid though it may be.

Surely, this place has always drawn migrants to it, from the very beginnings of its industriousness; those former agricultural workers from along the Severn (the Mundons et al), as iron production becomes important; French Huguenot refugees, escaping religious persecution, who brought their enameling enterprise here; glass makers from Lorraine and the Low Countries, whose skills were in demand by English entrepreneurs; agricultural workers from the Shire counties, displaced by mechanisation and drawn to the new kinds of work offered by the factories of the Industrial Revolution; our Irish labourers who came to dig the canals and later lay the railway tracks.

In the post-war world of 1945, there is the migration story of people from the Commonwealth countries of the British Empire, whose labour was required (and duly solicited) to rebuild the nation and to (in the parlance of the time) 'fulfill labour shortages'. Then at beginning of this century, new migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, Poland in particular. The refugee crisis in Africa and the Middle East bring many more.

Dr Brian Dakin, AKA Billy Spakemon, a Black Country performer and broadcaster, believes we've always been a multicultural society in these parts, with people coming from all over, "sucking up all these different words like a sponge, creating a new identity through language" as he puts it. Remarkably, today we can find 140 different languages spoken in Sandwell schools. That's something else, isn't it? Statistically the main languages spoken are English, Panjabi, Polish, Urdu and Bengali - underlying this is also our traditional Black Country Spake. Yet this potential virtuosity in linguistic ability is often untapped, cast in a wholly negative light.

Let's go back, as did that Churchill bloke did, when he produced his four volume '*A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*', to that era when there were barely any people at all in the Black Country, when the ability to make yourself understood across language groups was a matter of life and death. After the Romans left, taking their knowledge of Latin and Greek, in 449 AD the Germanic tribes arrived in Britain; those Saxons, Angles, Frisians and Jutes, foreign help invited by the indigenous Celts to fight against the Scots and Picts, who were marauding from the North. The newcomers eventually displaced the Celtic population, setting up their own kingdoms, establishing a common language, which we call Anglo-Saxon. Some local place names still tell us where the Saxons found river valleys, **halh**, or made clearings for meadows, **leah**, thus giving us **Cradders Lea**, **Dudder's Lea**, **Segleslei**, **Ruh leah**, **Willa's Halh**, **Wals Halh**, **Halh's Owen**.

Most writings of that period are preserved in the West Saxon dialect, the language of King Alfred of Wessex, the great cake burner of the dominating kingdom around Winchester. The future Black Country was then a sparsely populated borderland between the Saxons and the Danelaw, those northern and eastern areas of the country occupied by the Vikings, on the other side of Watling Street, the old Roman Road. This co-habitation of the country was largely hostile. After the Norman Conquest, French became the high 'official' language, used by the new governing class. Even at that point there were few people here. The Domesday book tells

us in **Wadnesberie** there are 16 villagers, 11 smallholders and 1 slave; **Cradeleie** has 4 villagers and 11 smallholders; in **Bromwic** we find 10 villagers, 3 smallholders. **Werwelie** has 2 villagers, 8 smallholders, 2 slaves. **Hala** is most prosperous, with 42 villagers, 23 smallholders, 8 slaves, 2 female slaves, 2 priests, and 4 riders. (The smallholders are middle class peasants, but villagers are the middle class peasants with more land. Riders are an escort for a Lord. Cottagers are the lowest of the low, but we don't have any in the Black Country at this point.)

Linguists describe the behavior of speakers in these scenarios as a **creole continuum**; where the invading language partly or wholly displaces the native one, where there is a continuum of dialects between the **acrolect** (the 'high' language of the invaders) and **basilectal** (the 'low' dialect) preserving more of a native language which mutates from its original form. People learn, in effect, to speak two languages, one of which is from the 'outside' and considered prestigious, one from the 'inside', intimately tied to home and ethno-cultural identity. That's the scientific perspective. Make of it what you will.

As this remote area was, for centuries, far from the centres of power and influence, the dialect remained Mercian, one of the variants of Anglo-Saxon. Many linguists believe this preference continues to give Black Country its distinctive sound. (Let's not get into the Great Vowel Shift or we'll be here all day.) According to Ed Conduit's research, of all the dialects in England, the Black Country dialect has the highest percentage of vocabulary descending directly from Anglo-Saxon - some 80% - making it one of the oldest dialects of England. Most of the other accents of England were far more influenced by the Old Norse of the Vikings and the French of Guillaume le Conquérant.



Yow dow 'alf talk posh, dow yow?

During the reign of Henry V Chancery Standard English emerged, based on the London and East Midland dialects, those areas that were the political and demographic centres of England. With the invention of the printing press and the spread of literacy, a form of language control began to be imposed. Dr Barrie Rhodes, an expert in dialect from Yorkshire explains it this way: “Standard English is nothing more or less than a particular dialect from the South East Midlands, that gained prestige because it was used by the organs of monarchy, government, the only two real universities that existed. And so it acquired a prestige as the standard form of language. But it is nothing more nor less than one of the many English dialects.”

The first dictionaries and texts on grammar appeared in the 17th century, so beginning to standardise spelling and pronunciation, eventually leading up to what we refer to today as ‘The Queen’s English’ and ‘Received Pronunciation’, those dialects we happily abuse. Linguist David Crystal argues that this process of ‘codifying a standard’ brought with it a devaluation of diversity. He decries the way that dialect is used to stereotype us in much the same way as skin tone. With 1.5 billion speakers of English around the globe, he points out that the Standard English of Southern England is indeed a *tiny* minority dialect. Even as it became the language of Empire, of business and commerce, of international travel, of the United States, of the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, of Parliament and the European Union, the majority of speakers of English in fact speak in a non-standard way, using dialect and local slang. This is, he argues, the normal linguistic way of life.

Though local accents began to break the hold of Standard English in the 1960’s, with The Beatles and the Mersey Poets broadcast regularly on television and radio, regional language was still seen to be detrimental. Broadcaster Sue Lawley was born in Sedgley in 1946 and attended Dudley Girls High School. As a teenager she had ambitions to be a singer and appeared at Willenhall Palais on Saturday evenings and worked as a waitress at Dudley Zoo’s Queen Mary Ballroom restaurant. While at Bristol University she consciously changed her local accent to ‘Received Pronunciation’. The moment of decision was one cold night in 1964, when she was waiting for a bus with other students: “I hopped up and down and said: ‘Coom on, buzz’. Jenny turned to me and said, ‘What did you say?’ After that it just hit me that I sounded different.”

Where am yow agooen?

She thought all the Black Country’s got going for it now is the accent. Let’s face it, she said, All the works gone, the industry’s gone, everything’s been ripped off. But it doesn’t matter whether you’re Black, White or Indian, where-ever you go, the accent stimulates a response, arouses interest, good or bad.



They ai as green as they am cabbage lookin’

She told me that in Cradley there’s still people who say ‘Thou thist, Thou doest’, and it takes her about 20 minutes to work out what they’ve said and then they’ve long gone. When they moved to Tipton, as a kid she couldn’t open her mouth without somebody making fun of her. She was talking too posh for Tipton, so she changed the way she spoke. It was a nightmare, she said. Her Mom did say some strange things though - she spoke a weird language of her own mixed in with slang, as she came from Romany stock. Her Mom would say twos for toes, puss for purse, paes for peas. Once her Mom went, “I don’t feel well, I feel as limp as a dishcloth.” She thought, how can you feel as limp as a dishcloth, what’s that got to do with anything?

In 2013, Colley Lane Primary School generated national news headlines when they told their pupils to speak *proper English* instead of the Black Country dialect, to halt a 'decline in standards'. The Daily Mail said: **Midlands school BANS children from using 'damaging' Black Country dialect.** The Daily Mirror said: **Yow cor spaek lyuke that!** Using pictures of Noddy Holder and Lenny Henry who they said 'have triumphed' with their accents, The Sun ran this headline: **WOR ON ACCENT, 'Snob' school bans kids from talking in Black Country dialect.**

The school pointed out that it was incorrect grammar and pronunciation, rather than the Black Country accent itself, which the school wanted to crack down on. A letter posted to parents stated the school wanted pupils to have the 'best start possible'. It added: 'Recently we asked each class teacher to write a list of the top ten most damaging phrases used by children in the classroom. We are introducing a "zero tolerance" in the classroom to get children out of the habit of using the phrases on the list.' These were the phrases the pupils were encouraged not to use:

1. 'They was' instead of 'they were.'
2. 'I cor do that' instead of 'I can't do that.'
3. 'Ya' instead of 'you.'
4. 'Gonna' instead of 'going to.'
5. 'Woz' instead of 'was.'
6. 'I day' instead of 'I didn't.'
7. 'I ain't' instead of 'I haven't.'
8. 'Somefink' instead of 'something.'
9. 'It wor me' instead of 'it wasn't me.'
10. 'Ay?' instead of 'pardon?'

Elsewhere, in 2014 New Cross Hospital in Wolverhampton set up classes for new nurses recruited from parts of Europe to cope with a staffing shortage. The nurses were so baffled by their patients' dialect that they were offered free lessons in words and phrases, learning expressions such as *cake 'ole*, *cat-lick* and *ta-ra a bit*. 'Patient feedback has been very positive,' said the hospital. The Daily Mirror said: **Nuss: 'Stop blartin' it's just bost!'**

Lessons in Black Country! What's the world coming to? Ed Conduit believes that: 'At an educational level, it would help children's learning if the speech of the neighbourhood was valued, and the separate grammar acknowledged.' Though generally the use of dialect has long been associated with a lack of education and the feckless lower classes, perhaps we should be thankful they were not also conversing in Singlish, Chinglish or Jafaikan.

Shireland Secondary School for Boys, Smethwick, 1964



Undoubtably, the Black Country has come in for some particular stick over the years. Back in 1851, Samuel Sidney, a chap born in Birmingham, published 'Rides on Railways', a guidebook to the London and North Western Railway. He offered this non-too favourable summary of the area:

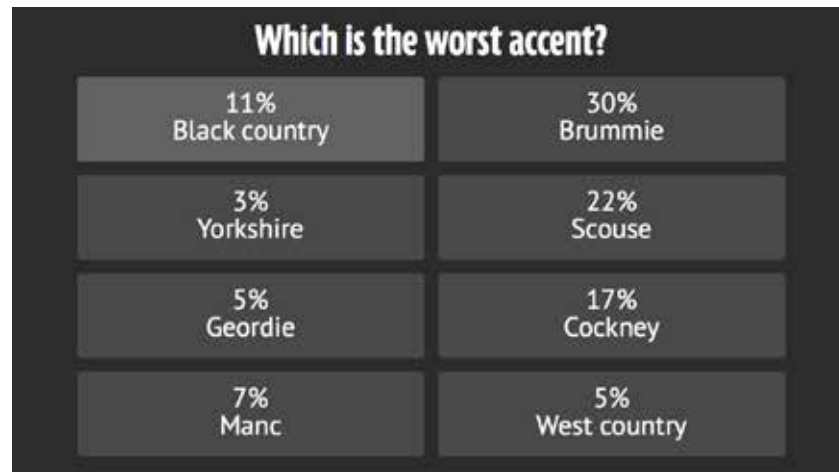
The majority of the natives of this Tartarian region are in full keeping with the scenery - savages, without the grace of savages, coarsely clad in filthy garments, with no change on weekends or Sundays, they converse in a language belarded with fearful and disgusting oaths, which can scarcely be recognised as the same as that of civilised England.

Charles Dickens described it as 'a cheerless region' in 'The Old Curiosity Shop', this passage illustrating a journey through the area:

Advancing more and more into the shadow of this mournful place, its dark depressing influence stole upon their spirits, and filled them with a dismal gloom. On every side, and far as the eye could see into the heavy distance, tall chimneys, crowding on each other, and presenting that endless repetition of the same dull, ugly form, which is the horror of oppressive dreams, poured out their plague of smoke, obscured the light, and made foul the melancholy air.

Writers ever since have rarely had anything positive to say about us, seeing the language as a lazy travesty of English, the place itself as horrible and uncouth, only worthy of belittlement.

If it's any consolation, a 2014 survey of accents by YouGov found 67% thought the neighbouring Birmingham accent unattractive, putting it at the bottom. Southern Irish topped the poll, with 61% finding it most attractive. While Black Country Dialect didn't feature on that list of options, at least there is now some recognition outside of the West Midlands that the accent is not the same as Brummie-speak. In response, a Daily Mirror online poll asked the question 'What's the best accent?' and here Black Country registered 18.3% against 7.7% for Brummie. They added a second question...



While world wide communications may favour the spread of a few major languages, let's not forget that diversity lies at the heart and soul of language and culture, this incredible ability to express ourselves in many complex ways and our habit to borrow and adapt words - enabling us to think differently. Being contrary folk, we don't follow the rules. Jan Terje Faarlund, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Oslo believes Old English adopted words for day-to-day things that already existed in the language.

He says: "Usually one borrows words and concepts for new things. In English almost the reverse is true - the day-to-day words are Scandinavian, and there are many of them." His examples include: *anger, awe, bag, band, big, birth, both, bull, cake, call, cast, cosy, cross, die, dirt, dream, egg, fellow, flat, gain, get, gift, give, guess, guest, hug, husband, ill, kid, law, leg, lift, likely, link, loan, loose, low, mistake, odd, race, raise, root, rotten, same, seat, sister, skill, skin, skirt, sky, steak, though, thrive, tight, till, trust, ugly, want, weak, window, wing, wrong*

Those colonisers from the Scandanavian countries saw no reason to change the way they spoke, but the natives adapted and eventually a new hybrid language formed. In the same way, when the British colonised the Indian subcontinent, as English became the dominant language it was not always a one way process. We have integrated many words from Sanskrit, Hindi and Urdu into our common speech - cot, pyjamas, juggernaut, bungalow, loot, bangle, shampoo, shawl, verandah and thug will be the ones you are most familiar with.

Language changes and evolves, as we find ways to describe fresh experiences; when different speakers come into contact with one another and we attempt to communicate more effectively. We encounter new words and incorporate them into our own speech, continually innovating, literally reshaping our identity. That's bostin, ai it?



The Sikh Community first began holding religious services at in a school in Brasshouse Lane, Smethwick, in 1958. They purchased the old Congregational Chapel building at 130 High Street, Smethwick, and the Gurdwara opening took place on 31 July 1961. It is now the largest in Europe, spanning over 70,000 square metres.

Bagnalls Factory, Wednesbury, 1970's



Ahm gooin um fer me tay

He recalled the time he pulled into a local garage on Crankhall Lane in Friar Park. It was just after school closing time. As he was filling up his car, he was amused to hear the words of a 10 year old girl dragging her 6 year old brother across the road. She shouted out, in a broad Black Country accent, 'Stop draggin' yer feet or or ah'll bost yer faerce!' These were the children of Mr Sandhu, who ran the garage. He found himself thinking: well, she doesn't speak like that at home and she doesn't speak like that at school; so she's got three languages, Punjabi, the so-called Queen's English and Black Country. He thought it was absolutely beautiful.

Bagnalls Factory, Wednesbury, 1970's



Aerdew aer kid, aer bin ya?

When her Dad came over from India he was not able to speak a word of English. He had been in Malaysia, then came to England and went straight to work in the foundry. He didn't need to speak that much English there, only certain words, so he didn't really pick up the accent. But you can acquire accents, can't you? You learn how to speak based on where you are and you get frowned upon, depending on how you speak, don't you? She thought it was false if you have to put on an accent to get a job. Sometimes you can be prejudiced against by the colour of your skin, but she supposed that if you spoke posher you would be seen as a better person and then the colour of your skin might not come into it. It would be all about the way that you speak. She says she can never get over how many kids, even now, speak with an Asian or Indian accent even though their own parents have been born and bred here. They still have that twang, don't they?



We are a friendly bunch.



SECG'S LEAH



BILSETNATUM



WEDGEBURY



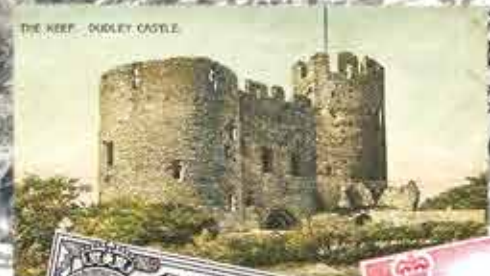
CWEORNHAELE



TIBINTONE



BROMWIC



EALDENBYRIC



NEDERTON

RUH LEAH REGIS



CRADDA LEAH



SMEDEUUICH



A fleet of TI cycles in use by Nigerian newspaper boys, March 1952



Even at the beginning of the 1950's local manufacturing companies, with thriving markets in Africa, the Middle East and India, encouraged the learning of other languages. 'If the market promises to be above average,' stated one TI directive, 'It may pay to appoint an agent and send out from Birmingham a man trained in the works to help and teach the agent's staff. This has to be considered with all the allied problems of getting the right man, and teaching him the language and customs.'

Apart from 'getting busy on the language' and getting a grasp of the country's geography, politics and industries, this fellow will have to get sales started 'in some extreme of climate and in a strange tongue... And, important in colouring his reactions, our ambassador will have survived the first onslaught of strange foods.'

Just don't mention groaty pudding.

TI cycle salesman with his armed guard in Afghanistan, March 1952



A Guide to the Proper Treatment of Factory Visitors (Training Booklet No. 3) from the 1960's offered ten useful tips for planned tours of the Broadwell Works in Oldbury.

Number 5 stated: *Know who speaks Greek* - The foreign visitors who have difficulty with their English are always delighted to meet anybody who can speak their own language to them. On the other hand, they will probably be hurt if they speak good English and you insist on talking to them in bad Portuguese. So use your judgement. In any case, it is a good thing to know who can speak foreign languages in case you need their services.'

‘Broadwell’s Brown Bullet. Prince Jacob, ex-airman from Trinidad,
wins the 100 yards sprint at Birchley Sport Day’
- from the September 1948 issue of *Apollo*, a magazine devoted to the news
and views of Accles & Pollock Ltd, PEL Ltd, Metal Sections Ltd



Anglo-Saxon: Beter e gyd baelst bost den gyd fittle be wersted.

English: Better a good belly burst than waste good food.

Jamaican Patois: Betta belly buss dan good bickle spoil.

Jamaican patois is English based with West African and Spanish influences, alongside Scottish and Irish dialects - a language which has survived through the oral tradition, much like the Black Country dialect itself. For example, the word ‘there’ might be pronounced as *de*, *deh*, or *dere*. It also borrows words from other cultures. *Duppy*, meaning ghost, is taken from the Asante Twi word *dupon* (cotton tree root), because of the African belief of malicious spirits originating in the root of trees. Words from Hindi include *ganja* (marijuana) and *janga* (crawdad). *Pickney* or *pickiney* meaning child - taken from an earlier form (*piccaninny*) - was ultimately borrowed from the Portuguese *pequenino* (the diminutive of *pequeno*, small) or Spanish *pequeño* (small).

In Black Country parlance, you will find words like *gooly*, from Hindustani; *doolally* from Marashtra, India; *bint* and *buckshee* from Arabic; *kiboshed* possibly from Yiddish; *argey bargey* from 19th century Low Scots; *fizzog* from Yorkshire and Lancashire (not to mention Old Norse); *dobbin* and *gob* from Irish; *flog* from Cant.

Owamya?

She asked, have you heard of the expression, colonisation in reverse? Well, that’s what happened. The offspring of the colonies have all come back to here. She had lived in Germany a long time, where they thought she had an American accent. When she came to the Black Country there was a familiarity, a warmth, because of the number of Caribbean people here. But if she was talking too posh, they check you, say to you ‘A wah yuh gwine wid?’ In West Bromwich she hears so many languages, it’s wonderful, every word under the sun.

Well, I’ll goo to the foot of our stairs!

It can be a heavy dialect but she found she could pick it up, she got used to it. Her Mom told her she had several different ways of speaking, the way she spoke to other kids in the street, the way she used to talk in the house, the way she used to talk in the class. If you have more languages you can adapt better. It was a melting pot of culture here, and she thought it always had been, even going into the far past with all the French and Germans who came here, and then the English spread themselves out, all over the world.

Amritsar, the Punjab, 1979

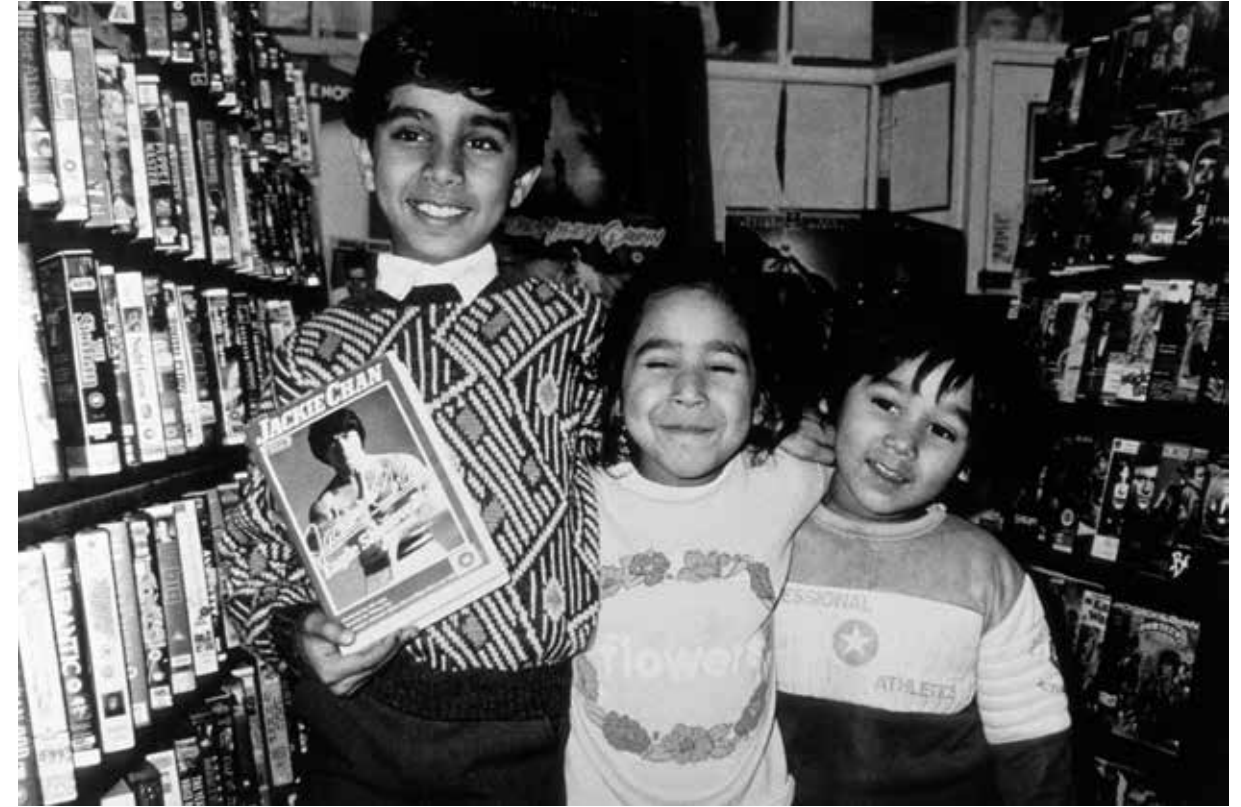


A very curious lexicon of words of Asian origin used by the British in India was published in 1886 (and is still in print today). The Hobson-Jobson, *A glossary of colloquial Anglo-Indian words and phrases, and of kindred terms etymological, historical, geographical and discursive*, was compiled by Henry Yule, a Scottish Orientalist, and Arthur Coke Burnell, an English scholar of Sanskrit. They recorded their observations on changing language and word usage.

For example, with regard to the word **Damn**, they noted it originally referred to a low value copper coin **Dām**, and went on to offer this explanation:

Damrī is a common enough expression for the infinitesimal in coin, and one has often heard a Briton in India say: “No, I won’t give a dumree!” with but a vague notion what a damrī meant, as in Scotland we have heard, “I won’t give a plack,” though certainly the speaker could not have stated the value of that ancient coin. And this leads to the suggestion that a like expression, often heard from coarse talkers in England as well as in India, originated in the latter country, and that whatever profanity there may be in the animus, there is none in the etymology, when such an one blurts out “I don’t care a dām!” i.e. in other words, “I don’t care a brass farthing!”

West Bromwich High Street, 1990



Wharro bab

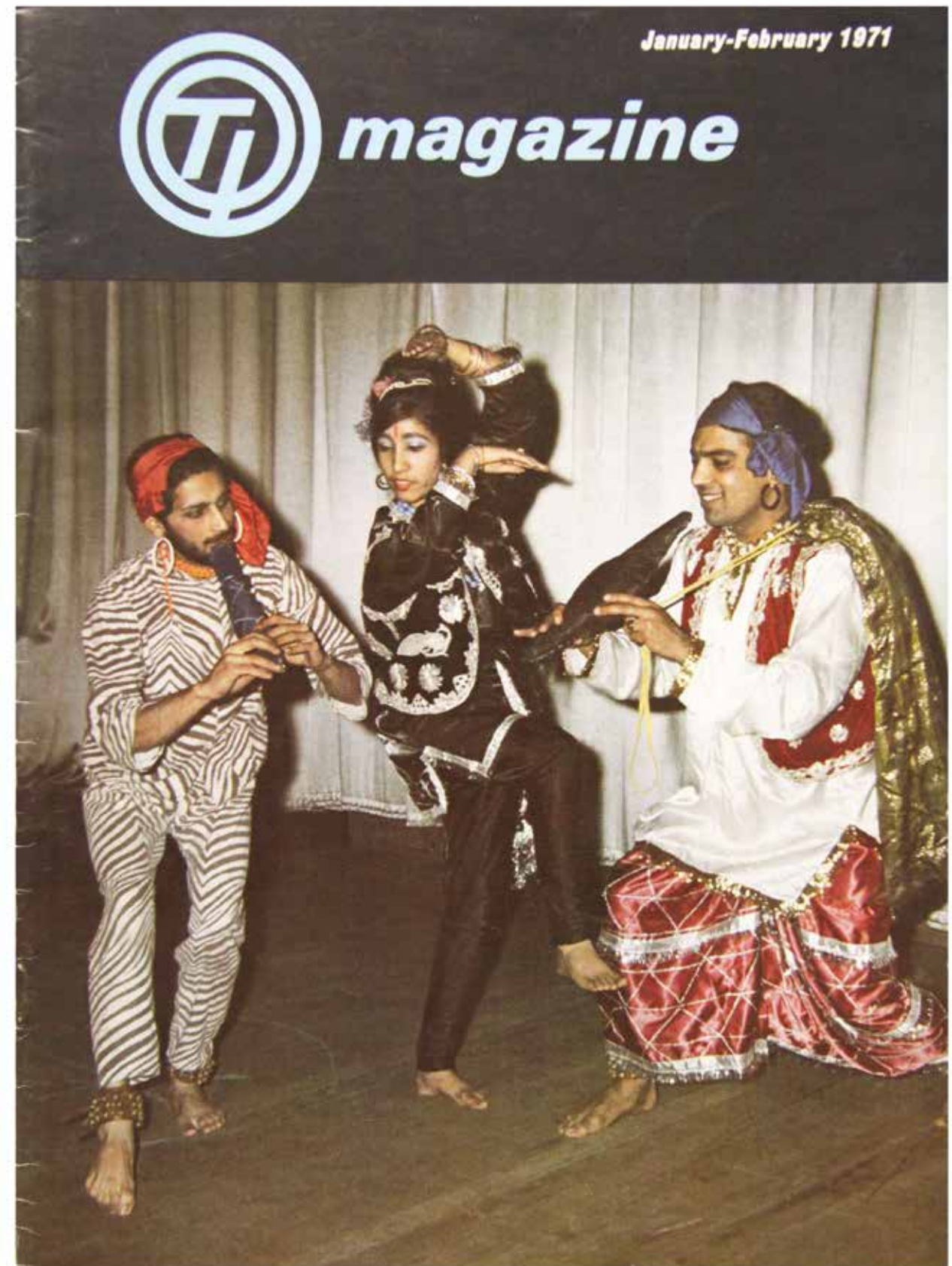
When she first came here, she got so confused. Now she can hear the different accents. She finds her accent changes depending on who she is with. She can hear herself imitating the accent. She doesn’t do it deliberately, it just changes. Oddly, when she goes back home she finds she switches into the Black Country accent and then her family pick it up from her. Her Mom and Dad argue about whether it’s a cob or a bap. Actually, her Mom is really well spoken, so if you talked to her on the phone you would think she was white. One thing that makes her laugh is that on the one hand you’ve got a slangy accent, then you pronounce bath or laugh the English way.

Weya yow frum then?

Her niece from Rowley said to them, "I love it when you talk that lingo, that patois, it sounds brill. I don't get why you don't talk like that all the time." You see, when they came here as children, they just adopted the dialect of the place and picked up the sounds that were around them. So sometimes they're talking patois with a bit of Black Country mixed in. Back in the '70's you could hear the strong Jamaican accents but with that local twang. Their parents would put S's on the end of everything. When the coalman came to deliver he would say "It's bloody cold, ai it?" and Dad would reply, "Ohs yes, it's blasted colds. Hows yous mate?" But they didn't like to hear you use it, they wanted you to speak proper. She now thinks their natural patois has been diluted. They speak slower now. Back home they wouldn't understand it at all; they'd see you as a foreigner.

Mindin' yer pays an q's

She told me it only began to make sense when she married a chap from the area. She moved around a lot as a child, places like Sparkhill, Ladywood, hearing a mix of Punjabi and Brummie, then she learned the Koran in Arabic. She spent a few years in Lahore only speaking Urdu, so when she came back she had to learn English all over again, taking elocution lessons while the other kids did P.E. At home you'd get a slap if you used any English slang word - her Mom wouldn't tolerate it. It was drummed into her, That's not how you speak! Even at the mosque they stressed how important it was to speak the English language correctly. But she can flip into Black Country quite easily now. Then her husband will say to her, What's happened to your accent, lady?



The front cover of the January-February 1971 issue of Tube Investments company magazine featured Punjabi dancers from the Simplex Foundry in Oldbury who 'brought a touch of the East to Blythe Bridge Christmas Party'.

Goo and play up your own end

The Black Country's very tribal, isn't it? It's not whether you come from Mirpur or The Lost City. If you're from Gornal say, then either place is just foreign, even if really you're from just down the road. They even talk different. People say it's very parochial round here and maybe that's why the language has survived. Language is the cornerstone of culture, isn't it? Along with work. So you pick up different aspects of language and habits and behaviour as you go along. When they came here after fighting the war and worked in the factories, they had things in common and that's how they picked up the language. They worked damn hard and had the respect of their fellow workers on the shop floor. Now things are more separated out. The English can't make up their mind who they are. Black Country folk know who they am. It's very local and specific.

If er'd a knew

She went to Shirelands and used to get teased about having posh accent, as her parents were from Brum. There were a few white kids and the rest from all over the world and the accent wasn't very strong Black Country. Innit! Innit! Every boy at school said that, at the end of every sentence. Innit this, innit that! At Uni all the northerners called her southern and all the southerners called her northern. She got quite irate about it. Then she had a linguist friend who told her that Dudley, literally two minutes up the road, was the closest spoken language to Old English. She was so pleased to then be able to tell them that they were ones who dai spake proper.



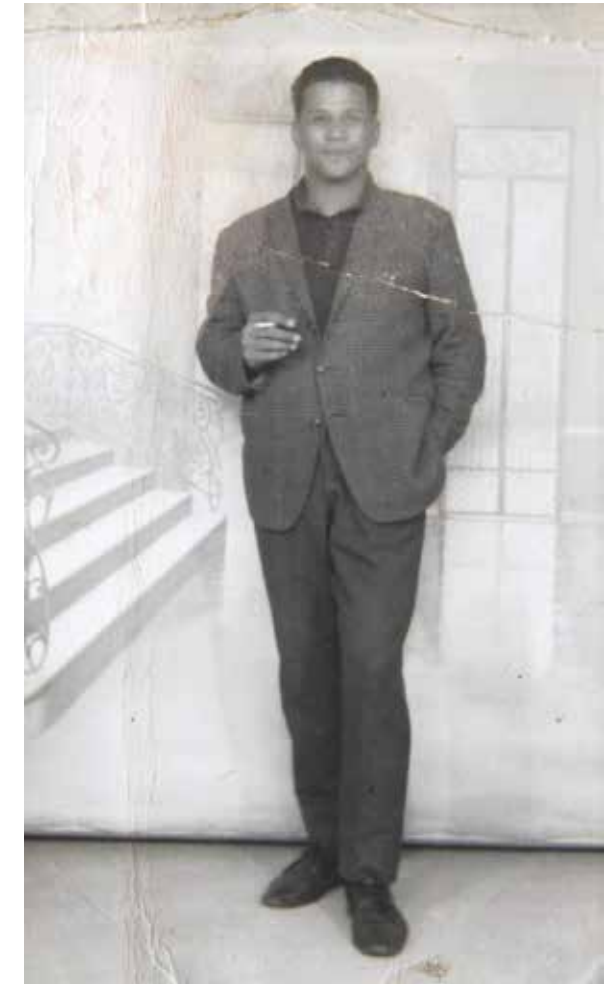
Beeches Road, West Bromwich, 1983

Ketch ote o' that!

She said her accent isn't as strong as it used to be. Your accent broadens out when you mix with different people. At work, if you have to use the telephone all the time as she did, a lot of your accent changes, so you're more understandable. But Glaswegian, that's a difficult one to understand. She can't make head or tail of it. She used to have to ask them to spell all the words out.

Yow gorra spake proper

Language is evolving so fast. His kids are always texting him and it confuses him; he says to them, Can you please say that in correct English? He heard his voice on tape and his kids said, You don't half sound common. He feels the Black Country dialect has been stigmatised, believes people should be proud of where you come from. He thought chobblin is an absolutely amazing word. It explains a lot, expresses everything. Especially about his younger brother, who was probably the noisiest eater that he'd ever known. He always used to sit next to him and he was forever saying to him, Stop bloomin' chobblin'. He remembers the time he had trouble understanding his Dad, he spoke that quickly when he was around his Jamaican mates. It was at the end of the 1950's when his Dad came over here just 18 years old and then he worked at GKN Sankey for more than 30 years, polishing the bumpers for Rolls Royce's he said, but he always kept his Jamaican side, that broad Caribbean accent that was perhaps his connection with the homeland.



Portraits of James David Blake, circa 1958 and 1968.

Ow bist thee ald butty? I cud do that afower brefuss.

They used to say, I'll bost yer clock.

BLACK COUNTRY



In the heart of the industrial West Midlands,
The Black Country has always been a place of
migration. How has the experience of migrants
from many places influenced the way we speak?

Produced by Brendan Jackson
for 'Where's Our Spake Gone?'
www.ourspake.co.uk

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