

## SAN ANTONIO TALK

Willard C. Minton asks: "Among radio and TV speakers, especially those doing commercials, it appears that a long vowel pronunciation is somehow indecent--to be avoided. For example a *sale* becomes a *sell* and *really* becomes *relly*."

"It occurs to me that, in teaching the General American accent that such media people are supposed to use later in their careers, such long vowel sounds are discouraged. Or perhaps it's just easier to say *yell* instead of *Yale* University?"

"Can you enlighten me? The abandonment of long vowel sounds not only grates on my ear but robs our language of some of its more pleasant tones, in my view."

Oh, boy! I wish I could enlighten. If I could, I'd be both rich and famous. Mr. Minton has picked up one little piece of a centuries-old problem that has all linguists baffled. That problem is the constant shifting of vowel sounds in English.

One famous linguist, Jakob Grimm, found a piece of the problem back in 1822. He noticed that just before Shakespeare's time people started mispronouncing the word *name*. It used to rhyme with *ham*--with a short /a/. But Shakespeare used it with a long vowel--as we do today. Not only that - people were also mispronouncing the word *nail*. It used to rhyme with *Nile*, but Shakespeare used it with the same long vowel as he used in *name*. Grimm noticed a half dozen similar changes in vowel sounds and called those changes the Great Vowel Shift. Today scholars call his little observation Grimm's Law.

Whatever is happening still goes on and on and on and on. Contemporary General American English, as Mr. Minton refers to it, contains ten vowels and four diphthongs. And the vowels keep shifting and shifting and shifting.

But we linguists have no enlightenment to offer. I can only repeat the wisdom I find in the words of my colleague John Algeo, who professes linguistics at the University of Georgia. John once said about Grimm's Law: "The stages by which the shift occurred and the cause of it

are unknown. There are several theories, but the evidence is ambiguous, so we will not go into them here."

Moreover, I do not know what to tell those of you who find such shifts "grating" and "robbing our language of some of its more pleasant tones." Grimm felt the same way, perhaps.

But the changes he disliked are the very ones we now adore: a pronunciation of *name* and *nail*--to go along with *sale* and *Yale*.

Long time readers of this column will recognize this Shifty Vowel problem. Readers have lamented--or praised, depending upon their viewpoints of language change--large numbers of people pronouncing the word *ear* as if it were *air*; *deal* as it were *dill*; and *school* as if were *skull*.

I am a poor person to ask, though. All of these changes, if they involve enough people in one place and at one point in time, create dialects of English. I study dialects. So I'm happy to see the changes. They keep me employed. Relly.

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7/3/95