

By Jim McCue

*Talking for Britain: A Journey through the Nation's Dialects* by Simon Elmes (Penguin, £14.99)

The BBC's *Word 4 Word* series began with more than fifty journalists touring the country to record people's talk. Are dialects dying under the media cosh? Is English being clobbered into uniformity, debased by all the jabber? Perhaps – but the BBC was about as likely to say so as the Government is to announce a fall in A-level standards.

“Are we all in time to be victims of the revolution of sameness?” asks Simon Elmes. “I’m tempted to think not.” Obligated to think not, rather, because it would make terrible radio. The bosses don’t want an elegy for the richness of English, they want a “celebration” of “diversity”.

Strangely, though, the PR lingo that has made “celebration” into a mere talking-up, without any sense of occasion, is not represented. This is no place for admen or admin, pinstripes or professional types. Instead, “the groups ranged from taxi-drivers to crane-drivers and bus-drivers, from dockers to drinkers in a gay bar and even one set of historic battle recreationists.” All the way from taxi-drivers to bus-drivers, hey?

So, with rhyming slang apparently defunct, we are told that “the capital’s way of speaking” is epitomized by *EastEnders* and *Big Brother*, and *Talking for Britain* descends to a litany of terms for toilets, trousers, mates and drunkenness.

The groups were asked for vernacular speech in forty such categories. Instead of tabulating the responses, Elmes strings them out through twelve regional chapters (though “Cumbria and Liverpool” shows about as much regional sensitivity as Ted Heath). The result is dozens of uninteresting paragraphs about whether an alleyway between houses is a backsie, a ginnel, a tenfoot, a jitty or a jigger. Or in Wales, apparently, a “gwli”, pronounced “goolie” and enthusiastically described as a “a piece of classic Wenglish”.

Given the “routines of the grid of questions”, Elmes has to confect some excitement, so in Peterhead, he introduces “one of the most singular sounds in Britain”, the Doric accent. “Listen to Wilma, Bob, Margaret, Sheila and Peggy’s list of words for playing truant”. But after this fanfare, all the five of them can manage is “didnae turn up” and “jinkin”.

In Barrow-on-Furness, Elmes is gratified to hear Jane “clock up another variant for left-handed”, caggy – forgetting that he has logged this in an earlier chapter, along with coggy, keggy and caggy-handed. Yes, the book is billed as “superbly browsable”, but this euphemism for unreadable doesn’t excuse the way names and facts are constantly recapitulated for those who have just tuned in. With no time ever to develop an idea, the effect is like reading scripts of the *Six O’Clock News*.

The general cheeriness is not, of course, marred by any mention of the way immigration has reduced some areas to mutually uncomprehending pidgins. We are introduced, though, to the nice Punjabi distinction between paternal and maternal grandmothers, “bibi” and “nani”. Other handy sayings include the Northumbrian woman’s “brokken off at the stock’n’ tops” (annoyed) and the Potteries cry of exasperation “Crimes of Paris!” The Lancastrian “baking cakes” is equivalent to the Midlands’ pregnant clause “full of arms and legs”. And the Yorkshire paradox “always doing summat, if it’s only nowt” meets its match in Belfast’s “I’ve felt worse many times when I was half as bad”.

Informal these may be, but they have their wits about them. Unfortunately, what Elmes finds infectious is the witless idiom of “it’s very real” and “his mates have issues”. Would you buy a survey of linguistic registers from a man who can write “Every decent cliché worth its salt has its imaginative feet planted in truth”?

He must imagine that dialect is a licence for incoherence. But the symptoms of Elmes disease cannot be blarneyed away. It is factually wrong, for instance, to say that “smart money” meaning a canny investment (American, since the 1920s) has anything to do with the “smart money” once paid to disabled workers.

With BBC impartiality, Elmes is equally dumb about every part of Britain. In Liverpool, “the bonding quality of Scouse... gives the local talk real relevance”, though not relevance *to* anything. Northumbria is “language-saturated”, but then so is everywhere else. And “There’s something about Yorkshire place names that reaches back” – as though “something” could give local significance to a universal banality.

For incoherence, it would be hard to beat Elmes’s conclusion that “local talk” is not threatened because new words are being invented by young people “tapping away to their friends in Argyll or Argentina via worldwide chatrooms”. Neither local, then, nor talk.

What the survey actually shows is that we are losing old rural dialects rooted in life’s rhythms (think of the Dorset poet William Barnes), and being left with a few forms of vicious urban patois such as Scouse and Glaswegian, which are concentrated in sufficient populations to persist.

These groups, as the Glaswegian expert Cliff Hanley puts it, are “defensive and aggressive”. Defensive because they sense that their “bread and butter talk” is not only a social disadvantage but inadequate to the banquet of human thoughts and feelings. And aggressive because they are condescended to, not least by broadcasters and politicians who think ignorant ugliness good enough for the likes of them. When a hairdresser in Truro says of her predicament, “You would expect somebody who is really unintelligent to speak a bit more common,” Elmes finds it “prejudicial” and “startling”. Who is she to be yearning for better?

In Birmingham, Dave articulates a grim new rule of grammar. Any noun with “-ed” on the end can be used to mean drunk. “I’m cabbaged, I’m tabled, I’m completely and utterly carpeted, I’m lettuced, I’m Christmas treed...” And tragically, the new word most widely recorded is one of the ugliest ever to disfigure the language. With some of its contempt being always self-directed, it speaks for far too much of Britain. “Minging.”

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