

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir/Madam,

I suspect I am not alone in finding Warren Shibles's two pieces on phonetics and pronunciation (RASK 2 & 3) difficult to evaluate. The way Shibles plays fast and loose with technical vocabulary, for example by using 'phonetics' to mean symbols of phonetic transcription, inspires little confidence in his expertise in the subject and makes it often difficult to follow his argument. Both articles are reinforced with massive bibliographies, but how well has he studied those works?

On page 60 of the first article (RASK 2, April 1995) we are told that Ellis (1869: vol. 1:23) even states that RP is 'the educated pronunciation of the ... pub'. Ellis does nothing of the sort. The mere mention of RP in connection with A.J. Ellis must arouse suspicion: surely the concept did not exist in his time. What Ellis in fact says in the relevant passage is that one may 'recognize a received pronunciation all over the country, not widely differing in any particular locality'. Notice the indefinite article here: this is not the same concept as the later well-established article-less RP, but only its remote ancestor. Ellis goes on: 'It may be especially considered as the educated pronunciation of the metropolis, of the court, the pulpit, and the bar'; but Ellis admits that 'there will be a varied thread of provincial utterance running through the whole'.

There are two serious objections to the use that Shibles makes of this passage. In the first place he misunderstands it: he does not realize that in British English 'the bar' (now usually spelt with a capital B) means 'barristers as a body, as a profession'. And yet, according to the American Heritage Dictionary a very similar usage (= 'lawyers collectively') exists in the USA. But Shibles adds to his blunder by committing a breach of scholarly procedure: he claims to quote Ellis's own words but fails to tell us that he has quietly changed 'the bar' to 'the pub'. This is unforgivable.

Yours faithfully,

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