Resurrecting rhymes, reasons and (no) rhotics: reconstructing Keats' pronunciation

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Reconstructing pronunciations from the past serves important purposes for linguistic study: we obtain a better understanding of past language states and the bases of attitudes; we can test theories of phonology and language change; and we expand our stock of knowledge of what languages can and cannot do. However, in recent decades, there has been fascinating work in reconstructing past voices for practical purposes, notably David Crystal's role in advising the Globe Theatre in their Original Pronunciation productions of several Shakespeare plays since 2004. This paper presents a reconstruction not of a variety or period in general, but of the pronunciation of a specific individual, the poet John Keats, who died two hundred years ago (1821). A hallmark of poetry is its ability to convey meaning and emotion through sound, even when read silently due to our 'inner speech' (Rayner & Pollatsek 1989), and thus an understanding of the poet's own voice is highly pertinent.

The main source of evidence comes from the pronouncing dictionaries whose heyday was at the end of the eighteenth century, the most influential being that of John Walker (1791), whose work sold widely and enjoyed numerous editions throughout the nineteenth century. Both centuries also saw numerous works on orthoepy and elocution, which together had a significant normative effect on pronunciation. However, the censured pronunciations also provide excellent evidence for how people were actually speaking at the time. Keats was denounced in his day as a 'Cockney poet' (Lockhart 1818), inviting us to explore what features he would have used. Although it seems clear that 'Cockney' is employed as a value judgement for 'aspirational vulgar' rather than a specific reference to dialect features, Keats clearly employs rhymes that are considered less 'polite' or 'correct' according to the more conservative prescriptive tradition. Most egregiously according to his critics, Keats rhymes historically rhotic with non-rhotic words, such as *farce-grass*, *thorn-fawn*, and *sorts-thoughts*, showing us that he was non-rhotic, a feature noted to occur in London (Smart 1810), but by no means restricted to there. Furthermore, *farce-grass* demonstrates his use of a retracted BATH vowel in both originally rhotic and non-rhotic words, where retraction was more advanced in the former group. Smart (1836) describes this as 'metropolitan usage'. Keats also rhymes *moors* with *shores* (in *Bright Star*) illustrating a less 'correct' pronunciation of the former as /moːz/ rather than /muːrs/. However, we draw the line at ascribing h-dropping to Keats even though it is amply attested at the time; its very strong associations with lower-class speech (Smart 1810: 'a very bad habit prevails, chiefly among the people of London'), together with no positive evidence from the poems, and combined with Keats' reasonable level of education lead us to give the poet his initial /h/s. Some other common present-day Cockney features were not in early nineteenth-century pronunciation; t-glottalling for instance is first mentioned later in the century by Sweet.

Other features we can reconstruct include a PRICE diphthong more like /ʌɪ/ than /aɪ/ 'in the mouth of the well-bred Londoner' (Smart 1936), a monophthongal FACE vowel, and more hypothetically, a slightly diphthongised GOAT vowel, to reflect the fact that breaking in GOAT preceded that in FACE. Finally, we see at this time yod-insertion after /k ɡ/ before a front vowel in words such as *can*, *get* and *begin*, thus /kjæn/ etc. (Batchelor 1809).

What do we learn about Keats through this exercise? We build a picture of a poet who is not backward-looking, but proud to be of his time even though he would have known his rhymes combined with his non-Eton/Harrow/Oxbridge/aristocratic background would have drawn criticism, as he took on a pursuit that some still considered the privilege of those with much loftier backgrounds.

References

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