G’Day Mate, How Ya Goin’? The Sounds of Aus — Study Guide

‘They speak as though they have a piece of barbed wire clamped on each side of their jaw.’

Introduction

The Sounds of Aus tells the rollicking story of the life and times of the Australian accent, described by the narrator, with tongue firmly in cheek, as ‘hauntingly beautiful’. The fact that this narrator is none other than John Clarke, one of New Zealand’s greatest exports, highlights the film’s wry sensibility. While chronicling the peculiarities of the Australian accent, the film investigates the complex nature of national identity, arguing that ‘our accent is a product of our social history’. The existence of one basic accent stretching across this huge continent is taken to indicate something important about the emergence of a shared Australian identity very early in the country’s white settlement. The film ranges across two hundred years of colonial and cultural history, with every issue and event refracted through this central theme. This is truly oral history, with each significant detail emerging from someone’s mouth and the unique sounds produced therein. From the First Fleet and the early days of the colony to Federation and the World Wars, the film traces the outlines of the country we were and of what we have become. Particularly entertaining is the sequence on the late post-war years, when our accent became a source of humour rather than cultural shame (think of the incomparable Dame Edna Everage, Ray Lawlor’s Summer of the Seventeenth Doll [1956], Jack Hibberd’s Dimboola [1967], the burgeoning local theatre scene with venues such as La Mama, and a resurgent film industry producing ocker classics such as The Adventures of Barry McKenzie [Bruce Beresford, 1972]).

The Sounds of Aus is at once entertaining and informative. It illustrates how the way we sound is a rich site for conflicts over identity. Myths about the accent are vigorously debunked and a varied range of people contribute to the film, from speech coaches to academics, actors and filmmakers. The film is to be credited for the ways in which it broadly embraces a host of ideas about what constitutes Australian-ness – the son of a Lebanese migrant is as important here as that Ipswich fish and chip shop owner.
Investigating our accent deepens understanding of how we see ourselves as Australians, what that might mean, and the influences that have shaped our national character. At a time when too many people drape themselves in the Australian flag for all sorts of dubious reasons, an examination of who we are, well leavened with humour, is most welcome.

**Curriculum Links**

*The Sounds of Aus* would work very well in a variety of classroom contexts. It has relevance to upper primary and junior secondary English, Australian History, Studies of Society and Environment (Human Society in Environment), and Cultural Studies. It provides an entertaining and accessible forum in which to debate issues about cultural and national identity. It also offers scope for a range of Speaking & Listening, Viewing and Drama teaching and learning activities, with opportunities for engaging exercises on language and the playful properties of colloquial speech.

**Activities & Discussion Suggestions**

**Language Issues: Exploring Key Terms**

Devise definitions of the following terms, using the dictionary where appropriate. Ask students to suggest other important terms that arise from their viewing of the film.

- received pronunciation
- cultivated accent
- elocution
- phonics
- cultural cringe
- register
- strine
- creole
- ocker
- soft palate
- cockney
- dialects
- rising inflection
- multiculturalism
- empire
- globalization
- What do we mean by the idea of ‘mother tongue’?
- What is meant by the term ‘cultural imperialism’?
- What is meant by the term ‘Australian register’?
- What is a diphthong and what significance does it have for the Australian accent?
- What is meant by ‘the theatre of identity’ and how is accent an expression of this?
History Issues:
Who Were We Then?

• Make a list of the cultural and historical forces that have influenced the Australian accent.

• Dr Bruce Moore says that in the first twenty to thirty years of the colony there was a ‘foundation accent’. What does he mean by this term?

• What happened to the Australian accent after Federation? (Consider issues such as the increased importance of Empire, striving for a ‘better’ Australian English, more emphasis on cultivated/received pronunciation, emphasis on elocution in school inspectors’ reports, etc.) In what ways can accent be considered a marker of ‘learning and civilization and the qualities of empire’? In what ways has the Australian accent in particular functioned as a marker of our connection to empire?

• Historian Michael Cathcart claims that ‘The First World War divides Australia’. Discuss how and why this might be the case. Why might there have been a rise in class-consciousness after World War One?

• What is the paradox inscribed in the ANZAC legend? What do ANZAC and AIF stand for?

• There are accounts of World War One diggers trying to ‘sound more Australian’. Why might they have wanted to distance themselves from the British?

• Discuss the idea of the cultural cringe. Is it still an issue today? Prompt students to consider whether they assume popular culture or consumer products from overseas are superior to home-grown products.

• One commentator says of the late 1960s that finally ‘being Australian was OK, you didn’t have to apologise for it’. Why might Australians have once wanted to sound like they came from elsewhere? Is this still an issue?

• It is suggested that the cultural cringe really took hold in the 1940s, exacerbated in
part by the ABC. What was happening in the Australian film industry at this time? (It was in a state of collapse.) Can you see a connection between the two phenomena?

- When the ABC was first established, three quarters of its announcers were British, and it was clear the national broadcaster was intent on mimicking the BBC. Why? What is a ‘toffy Oxbridge accent’?
- Max Gillies says that up until the Second World War, actors tried to sound English; after it, many tried to sound American. Discuss. Make a list of actors who you think sound distinctively Australian.
- Elocution lessons were part of Australian children’s schooling from Federation until the 1950s and 1960s. What do you think these lessons might have involved? Why might they have been abandoned at this particular point in time?
- Jack Hibberd says of the Melbourne theatre scene in the late 1960s that there was a ‘sense of a laboratory’. What does he mean by this? What events marked the so-called Cultural Revolution in Australia (c.1968-1972)? What is meant by the idea of a ‘deregulation of the culture’?

**History Issues: Who Are We Now?**

- What makes us who we are?
- Make a list of current youth expressions and slang (nothing obscene allowed!). Where do these expressions derive from? Are most of these expressions American in origin? What accounts for this influence?
- In what ways might the Australian Oxford Dictionary differ from its British counterpart?
- Do you think the United States or the United Kingdom has had a greater influence on the Australian accent? One speaker says that ‘we’re at the arse-end of the world,'
heads turned like sunflowers towards America. What does she mean? Do you agree?

• Discuss the influence of hip hop. Is it a form of dishonesty or ‘selling out’ for Australian hip hop artists to simulate American accents?

• What is meant by the idea of the ‘world getting smaller’?

• John Clarke muses ‘How much international influence can an accent withstand?’ What effect might globalization have on the Australian accent? One perspective on the Australian accent is that it is under threat. What is your opinion on this? What stance does the film take on this? (The Australian accent is described variously as: ‘utterly resilient’; ‘bullet proof’; it ‘simply refuses to change’; it exists ‘in defiance of’ the juggernaut of American popular culture. And yet the film also shows how the accent has evolved …)

• Are we more comfortable with who we are now as Australians than we were 100 years ago?

• The United Kingdom has a range of very distinct regional accents, as does the United States of America. Why do you think these variances are more marked than in Australia? Screen segments of My Fair Lady (George Cukor, 1964) to elucidate the relationship between class and accent.

• ‘Accent is a marker of class.’ Discuss.

• What effect has the influx of migrants had on the Australian accent?

• How would you describe the ‘wog’ accent?

• ‘Your accent is a tribal calling card.’ Discuss.

• How does Santo Cilauro account for the peculiarities of the Italo-Australian accent? (He says many of the Italian migrants were working in factories alongside working-class Anglo-Australians with very broad accents.)

• What does Australian-Turkish student Erdem Koc say about his experiences at high school? (He says that Anglo students were in the minority and came to adopt the ‘wog’ accent.)

• What is Aboriginal English? Stan Grant says the accent he uses now as an SBS newsreader is ‘a long way from the accent that I started life with’. Discuss his observations on his accent and the influences on language in the Indigenous community in which he grew up.
How We Sound: Accent and ‘Cultural DNA’

- ‘Accent is about how you perform yourself.’ Discuss.
- ‘There is one unifying voice underpinning our accent.’ Discuss.
- Do you agree with John Clarke that the Australian accent is ‘hauntingly beautiful’?
- In what ways is the Australian accent unique?
- What sort of accents would have been heard on the First Fleet? (John Clarke describes it as a ‘dog’s breakfast’ that then evolved into ‘the mongrel’ Australian accent. Most of the dialects were from the South East of England and London.)
- What role did children play in the development of the Australian accent during the period of early settlement? (According to one historian, children are the instigators of change in accent; they produce new dialects, as if to say ‘we belong here, we are the children of this place’.)
- How different was the Australian accent of the late 1800s to that of today? (It was not very different, closer to today’s general accent than the broad, ocker accent.)
- Is there a difference between rural and urban Australian accents?
- Bruce Beresford’s father told his son that ‘no-one wants to hear Australians talking because they sound “funny”’. What do you think he might have meant by ‘funny’? Why might he have thought this? How did his son react?
- What qualities do you need to effectively mimic other accents?
- Screen a brief segment of Holy Smoke (Jane Campion, 1999), in which Kate Winslet adopts an Australian accent for her performance. (Victoria Mieleskwa, the voice coach who is interviewed in the documentary taught Kate to do the Australian accent in Holy Smoke). How successful is her performance? What does she do with her voice and her pronunciation? For comparison, look at Meryl Streep’s depiction of Lindy Chamberlain in Evil Angels (Fred Schepisi, 1988). Streep’s slightly unusual Australian accent is
based upon her attempt to accurately represent Lindy Chamberlain’s slightly New Zealand-infused accent. (For truly dreadful accents it is still difficult to go past Dick van Dyke’s Bert in *Mary Poppins* [Robert Stevenson, 1964], while Keanu Reeves is also shocking in *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* [Francis Ford Coppola, 1992].) Have a look at a segment of *Kath and Kim* for a contemporary version of the broad Australian accent.

- Give students a week in which to record from the television examples of the broadest Australian accent they can find. Screen the videotapes in class and have students vote on the ‘most Ocker’ speaker for a prize. Particular students could be designated to hunt for other accents on commercial TV – Indigenous, ethnic, etc.

- Divide the class into pairs and have each pair devise a comic dialogue between an Australian and an overseas tourist. The dialogue is to be structured around misunderstandings caused by the Australian accent. See the web sites listed at the end of this guide for some starting points. (For example, a British tourist who was hospitalized during her trip here was alarmed when a nurse told her ‘You’ll be going home today’ – and she heard, ‘You’ll be going home to die’.)

- Make a list of the qualities/adjectives associated with the Australian accent by various speakers in the film (for example, warm, good-natured, playful, irrelevant, rebellious, like a flock of ducks).

- What is a rising inflection? What theories are used to explain it?

- Compare the Australian, New Zealand and South African accents. (The documentary does not provide these comparisons. You may need to do further research to define the specific linguistic characteristics of each.)

- Analyse Paul Hogan’s use of the Australian accent. Consider the idea of the ‘brand’ and of identity as a marketing tool: the broad ocker accent as one of our most successful exports.

- Myth Busting: make a list of the myths about the Australian accent that the film challenges or debunks (for example, that there are distinct regional differences; that the accent developed in response to the climate, pollen or flies; that it derived from cockney). How many of these myths had you heard? Why might they have arisen? (i.e. how effective are they in explaining some of the peculiarities of the Australian accent?)

- ‘It’s not what he says, it’s the way he says it.’ Discuss.

- One of the Adelaide matrons says that John Howard sounds ‘peasant-ish’. What do you think she means by this? Do you agree? What impression does she create?
• ‘Education is more important than accent.’ Discuss.

• Does everybody have an accent? Describe your own accent. What cultural influences can you identify within your class?

• Tape record each student reading (from the class text, their own writing or a selected poem). Discuss how each student sounds, the qualities of their voices, the types of accents. (This is an important opportunity to build student skills in constructive criticism: students need to learn how to offer each other honest but encouraging feedback and teacher modelling is very important here. For example, ‘your performance would be even better if you slowed down a little for dramatic effect’ is preferable to ‘you spoke too fast, no one could understand you’.) Are students surprised by how their voices actually sound to others?

Select some examples of classic Australian poetry (for example, *The Man from Snowy River*, *The Sentimental Bloke*; see reference list at the end of this guide for further suggestions) and have students experiment with reading aloud using different accents.

• One commentator, Victoria Mieleskwa, notes that ‘The Australian accent takes a number of different faces. There isn’t one classic Australian accent’. Political commentator, George Megalogenis argues that the range of Australian accents asserts different versions of Australia, and that Pauline Hanson and Nick Giannopoulos speak with equally authentic Australian voices. Discuss. Make a list of Australian public identities and organize them into some kind of schema according to their accents and what is known about the influences on their accents.
Talking Pictures:
The Film Itself

• Discuss the role of the narrator in the film. Why might the filmmakers have chosen John Clarke for this role? What does his persona and voice add to the film? How different might the film have been with another narrator? Consider alternate narrators, such as John Laws, Ray Martin, Bud Tingwell, John Flaus, Gina Riley, Mary Kostakidis, Noel Pearson and Lowitja O’Donohue. In what ways might it be considered fitting to have a migrant narrating *The Sounds of Aus*? Write a fifty word synopsis of *The Sounds of Aus*.

• Suggest three other possible titles for this documentary.

• Write a review of *The Sounds of Aus* to be published in a national daily newspaper.

• Design a timeline detailing the historical and cultural events touched on in *The Sounds of Aus*. Events to consider including on your timeline: The First Fleet, Federation, World War One, post-war influx of European migrants, the Whitlam Government, the Vietnam War. Annotate your time line with analysis of what these historical moments meant for the Australian accent.

• Make a list of the people who contribute to the film and their various backgrounds. (For example: voice coach, Victoria Mielewska; phonetician, Felicity Cox; historians, Michael Catchcart and Joy Damousi; editor of the *Australian Oxford Dictionary*, Bruce Moore; retired newsreader, Jim Dibble; well-enunciated queen of etiquette and deportment, June Dally-Watkins; social analyst, Bernard Salt; political commentator, George Megalogenis; actors and comedians Max Gillies, Rachel Griffiths, Denise Scott, Mary-Anne Fahey, Bert Newton and Barry Crocker; and filmmaker Bruce Beresford). Can you think of other people who might have developed other aspects of the topic?

• ‘This film isn’t really about the Australian accent at all.’ Discuss.
**Paying Attention: Film Comprehension**

Encourage students to take notes during the screening of the documentary.

**Questions**

1. Who was James Dibble?

2. Why was 1932 a significant year?

3. What happened to Banjo Paterson at the ABC? What does this tell us about our culture at that time?

4. What are the three general types of Australian accent described in the film?

5. What is the most common Australian accent today?

6. How many children were on the First Fleet?

7. What does Stan Grant identify as some of the ingredients of Aboriginal creole? (Stan’s father is Wiradjuri and his mother is from Kamilaroi country in northwest NSW.)

8. At what period was the divide between broad and cultivated accents the greatest?

9. When were elocution lessons dropped from the standard school curriculum?

10. The Australian accent developed in response to particular aspects of the Australian condition, including the harsh sun, pollen and the huge number of flies. True or false?

**Answers**

1. James Dibble was the first Australian television newsreader (1956).

2. 1932 was the year in which the national broadcaster, the ABC, was launched.

3. He was fired because he sounded too Australian! Barry Crocker explains there were complaints: ‘it was too awful to hear this Australian accent’. It reveals the depth of the ‘cultural cringe’.

4. i) broad ocker;  
   ii) general Australian accent (more neutral than ocker); and iii) cultivated or received pronunciation (‘posh’).

5. The general Australian accent is the most commonly spoken today.

6. It is estimated there were forty children on board the First Fleet.

7. Stan Grant says you can trace elements of Scottish and Irish accents in certain Indigenous communities, reflecting the patterns of population in particular regions.

8. The divide between broad and cultivated accents was greatest after World War One.

9. Elocution lessons were dropped on the whole from the standard school curriculum in the 1960s.

10. False.
Considering Our Cultural Artefacts

- *The Bulletin* was a very important magazine, largely because it promoted Australian stories and Australian voices. See what you can discover on the Internet about the magazine’s history.

- Leonard Maltin suggested *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* was ‘a bit much for American audiences’. Screen segments of the film and discuss its reception.

- Why did Bruce Beresford resist efforts to dub or re-voice his film *Breaker Morant* (1980) with American voices for the US market?

- What can you find out about *Let Stalk Strine* (published in 1965)? In *Let Stalk Strine*, the term air fridge means what exactly? (average) What does the author’s name stand for? (Afferbeck Lauder = Alphabetical Order) Discuss terms such as Emma Chisit (how much is it?) and compile a class list (see web sites listed at the end of this guide for examples).

- Introduce students to rhyming slang and compile a class catalogue of terms. Have the students write a short story incorporating appropriate examples of rhyming slang. Share these with the class.

- For additional relevant audio and visual material, visit the National Film and Sound Archive, ScreenSound Australia at <http://www.screensound.gov.au>.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Towards Semiotics: The Signs of Everyday Life

- *The Sounds of Aus* can be considered an accessible example of semiotic studies. To build on this foundation, teachers could touch on Roland Barthes’ seminal *Mythologies*, which analyses the quotidian, those everyday elements of life such as accent that are so commonplace we regularly fail to notice them. Semiotics is the study of signs, of the ways in which typical objects and attitudes reveal details.
of significance about who we are and how we see and experience the world. The studies that make up Barthes’ collection are brief, only a few pages each, and range across topics such as toys, milk, soap powder and plastic; students could select one, read and analyse it, and then conduct a similar semiotic investigation into an aspect of their daily lives ... (For teachers adopting Luke and Freebody’s Four Roles approach to Reading and Writing, this provides a rich opportunity to develop knowledge and skills in the fourth role of text analyst.)

Resources


Useful Web Sites

Poet: Henry Lawson
http://www.poemhunter.com/henry-lawson/

Banjo Paterson Poems

Banjo Paterson’s Poems of the Bush
http://www.middlemiss.org/lit/authors/patersonab/poemsbush.html

Dorothea Mackellar, My Country
http://www.imagesaustralia.com/mycountry.htm

Dictionary of Australian Slang

Australian Rhyming Slang
http://goaustralia.about.com/cs/language/a/rhymingslang.htm

Strine: Dictionary of Terms
http://www.strine.org.uk/Dict.html
Speak Australian Ya Mug!
http://www.australianbeers.com/culture/generallingo.htm

Australian Language

Overview of Australian English Accents
http://dea.brunel.ac.uk/cmsp/Home_Yan_Qin/intro/intro_au.htm

**The Sounds of Aus**

2007
Duration: 53 minutes 32 seconds
Writer/Researcher/Associate Producer: Lawrie Zion
Producer/Script Editor: Yael Bergman
Director: David Swann
Editor: Mark Atkin ASE
Cinematographer: Justin Brickle
Executive Producer: Laura Waters
Production Company: Princess Pictures

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