

Is it new way of speaking?

Emboldened by the successful search for *themselves* (*Comment*, ET22 Apr 90, ET37 Jan 94), I have screwed my courage to a new syntactic sticking point – this time concerning the indefinite article. Penny Stewart and Richard Fawcett (also ET37) have convincingly demonstrated that, in American English, usages such as *This is a old problem* are becoming common. I would now like to point to something else that has been happening in recent years, mainly but not exclusively in British English: not the loss of linking *n* this time, but the vanishing of the article itself.

For some years I have thought I heard in casual native speech occurrences such as *It's nice house* and *He's good man* – but found it close to impossible to get other people (Anglicists or otherwise) to take me seriously. For a long time I thought I was dealing simply with schwa forms so weak that they were virtually non-existent or with reformulations in which people start, for example, to say *It's nice* and end up trying to say *It's a nice house*: performance errors, if you like.

Then I began to hear and write down clearcut specimens on the BBC: for example, twice within half an hour on the *Today* programme, Radio 4, 21 June 94: at 8.10 a.m., a performing artist saying, 'People that don't think I'm important artist...'; at 8.20 a.m., an anti-nuclear campaigner, Dr Green, saying, 'Nirex are going to apply for underground laboratory'. In addition, I now have a small collection of print citations that includes three from *The Sunday Times* (London) and four from *The International Herald Tribune* (Paris). Examples:

- *ST*, 13 June 93: 'He was decent, caring man who was disgusted by the vandalism.'
- *IHT*, 15 Apr 93, quoting an American: 'It is virulent strand of racism.'

If the indefinite article is indeed being increasingly dropped in this way, some native users of English would appear to have begun to use a construction long recognised – and severely frowned on – as a shibboleth of certain foreign users. It would be good to have further comment.

Tom McArthur

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Letters to the Editor: write to Dr Tom McArthur, Editor, *English Today*, 22–23 Ventress Farm Court, Cherry Hinton Road, Cambridge CB1 4HD, UK.

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