

AMERICAN DIALECTS

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Introduction

Good for an oral presentation, local, area language, dialect often appears in phonetic spelling because English is notoriously unphonetic in a lot of its spelling and some find humor in misspelling, whether it be, for example, “posh” British (“Jolly Well Spoken”), Cockney (from London), Geordie (from Newcastle), Scouse (from Liverpool), Scottish English, Irish English, and in the style of comedian Ali G (something like US rap). However, my subject here, as the title shows, is not British dialect. British dialects constitute a huge corpus which has been *fraffly* (frightfully) well mapped and extensively studied for what idiom calls donkey’s years. There is too much of that for me. As Potter says:

It would be no exaggeration to say that greater differences in pronunciation are discernible in the north of England between Trent and Tweed [two rivers about 100 miles apart] than in the whole of North America.

There are, in fact, a great number of regional and social dialects in North America, too. The cinema and the broadcast media have made us all familiar with many American dialects (which involve both pronunciation, “accent,” and word choice, grammar, etc). You know the historic “Brooklyn accent” (*toidy-toid, erl boiner, Greenpernt*) or the egregious Bronx (*cubba kwawfee uh tzee*) and the current *awesome, bitchen, grody, rad*, but (like, y’know) *totally beige* (which is to say “boring”) *airhead* Valley Girl way of speaking. That comes from the San Fernando Valley of Southern California. *I’m sooo sure* you will be interested in and informed by something perhaps less familiar, even *tubular, wonelly*. I shall address some others, even those of Philadelphia, one of the more interesting dialects of the US north. It has not received its share of comment, overshadowed by such cultural centers of the East Coast as Boston and New York City and, once upon a time, Charleston (South Carolina, which has an extremely unusual speech), back when there was not much of any western US. In no city is the local dialect spoken by absolutely everyone there. We each have a personal way of speaking, an *ideolect*. That is influenced by our locality and everywhere in mobile America there are new people, summer people, outsiders, tourists.

Both the plain and if you will--as many Americans say today in our increasingly tentative way of communicating (you know what I’m saying? Like, you know where I’m coming from, right?)—fancy ways of speaking are, of course, dialects, as are to a certain extent the fringe vocabularies of more or less closed groups such as prisoners, drug addicts, lawyers, any kind of workers. Railroad slang was once widespread. Youth and age speak, as well as dress, differently, although the old may adopt new teen fashions.

We encounter dialects even if we do not visit some quite isolated place such as Ocracoke Island or the Sea Islands of Georgia. There, *we was there* is obsolescent, *she weren't there* obsolete, and there have been changes in the way of saying *toime and toide wait for no man*, reminding us that dialect can involve grammar or pronunciation. We find dialects elsewhere in the southern US or the “thumb” of Upper Michigan woods or in places Germans settled in Texas or Swedes settled in Minnesota. So-called “local accents”.

All Americans Have Accents

We all have one. The US does not really have a single, received, standard pronunciation; Americans all “have an accent” when speaking, even if a lot of dialect is repressed in formal writing and there is a concept of “correct” American. We all speak one or more dialects.

In Canada they speak various versions of Canadian. In India they speak a variety of English dialects or Indian English and many are trained to speak an acceptable American as businesses outsource telephone work. In Australia they speak Strine, Australian. (Dialect often shortens words.) Every language and each of its dialects has a lexicon, its own vocabulary. *Strine*, however, refers basically to pronunciation, not the regular and slang words of the *Straylunz*. Written Australian is not as difficult for (say) Americans to decipher as the spoken dialogue of *Crocodile Dundee*.

Writing Dialect

In writing, the way people actually speak is often mocked. A friend of mine has invented an Aussie he calls Emmett Chizzit (who always asks the price of things). You see southerners in the US made fun of with *kayet* (cat), *ass* (ice), and *code in de haid*. Realize, however, that any accent at all if phonetically rendered *iz gunalookod* with that great disconnect in English between sound and spelling, not found in more regular languages, such as Spanish. Much dialect spelling is unnecessary: there is no difference in pronunciation between *boyz* and *boys*. When you are writing a play or film script it is best just to say in your script’s first stage direction that your character is from Vermont or Oklahoma if you wish and then you don’t have to try weird spelling. You can introduce local idiom: *Ah don’ kyare* should *prolly* appear in print more like “It don’t make me no never mind”.

Canadians can usually pass as some kind of American, if they speak Canadian English and not Canadian French or one of the languages of the aboriginal First Nations. With practice you can likely distinguish between someone from Newfoundland or Nova Scotia and someone from Ontario or British Columbia. There are a lot of dialects of Canadian English, though an American may say the most obvious difference between Canadian and American is that Canadians use “British spelling” (*centre, honour, labour*, but not *clew* or *kerb*) and have a “Scottish” way of pronouncing the *ou* in *house, out*, and so on. We think that is funny (eh!) though not as funny as some of our own southern dialects. Joke:

Arkansas State Trooper (to motorist he has stopped): Got any ID?

Arkansas motorist: 'Bout what?

Studies of American Dialect

. In the study of placenames, maps are never enough because many names do not appear on official maps. Similarly, interviews can never tell the whole story because they must be comparatively few and random, and even if they succeeded in recording dialect and pronunciation they cannot not be wholly reliable a generation later. Dialect reports also have to be recorded, not transcribed: language has intonation. Ever hear a Londoner say “Are you alright?” with the last word three syllables or sing the tune to “You must be joking”? Black English might stretch out the second syllable of *awry* (not the standard *awry* but the black equivalent of *alright*). Often—do you pronounce the *t* in *often*?--repeated is the story of how Mrs. Clemens tried to embarrass “Mark Twain” to make him stop *cussin*'. She kept a list of all the swear words he used one day and read it to him at the dinner table. He allowed as how she had got the lyrics but he said she had missed the music.

Soon we may cease writing books about such language, ignoring the music, and we shall present material updatable and online, with sound and pictures, for technology is always advancing. Good, for language is dynamic, in flux, changing slower or faster in one place than another due to various factors. In the future, technology may drive the study of language more in the direction of the spoken vernacular rather than the formal written language which is the dress-up version. Right now, lexicographers are more and more facing up to the fact that the *parole* (spoken language) is the basis, not the *langue* (the more formal written version), and indeed Americans are writing as well as speaking and dressing and acting, generally, ever more informally. T-shirts outnumber ties.

Of course snobbery has always mocked those who spoke in a fashion that was identified as imprecise and uneducated, but today grammar is not well taught and elocution, which once was an essential part of the social-climber's or even the public school teacher's training, is practically not taught at all. American speech is often careless. You can see evidence in blogs and “txt msgs” which are jotted down conversation, unedited.

Prejudice and Mockery

Americans continue, however, to make regional and class distinctions and to criticize dialects. They are still making fun of some aspects of southern speech and western and even eastern speech (pronunciation, unusual forenames, etc.) that have altered faster than stereotypes do. Popular culture's standard characters tend to keep *Leroy* and *Billy Bob* and *Oral* around long after they have ceased to be common in reality. Today African-American names have become terrifically inventive and stress a greater divide between black and white. The strangest black forename I happen to have encountered has been that of the dancer *Shayla-Vie Jenkins*. You may have your own favorite (*Arithmetic*, *Deewayne*, *LaToynnetina*, etc) and may even be aware that *Tyrone* has replaced *LeRoy*. You may even know that *Justin* is in the Top Ten African-American names for boys while *Towanda* and such have given way to ever more unusual forenames. In popular

culture, *Kevin* is now the commonest name for Asian-Americans, *Scott* has become Jewish (no Scot is named Scott), and names of Irish origin have been taken up by many kinds of non-Irish people, the names often being misspelled, as with *Shawn* and *Katelynn* while the Irish *Caitlin* is spelled like that but pronounced “KATE-lin” and not as the Irish pronounce it (Kate-LEEN).

Popular culture distorts in many ways. One example: the show-biz names of African-Americans (*Tempestt*, *Oprah*, *Mi’chelle*) do somewhat reflect the current fashion of African-Americans to bear highly unusual forenames but many of TV’s ethnics sound much more like the rest of Americans off screen. And African-Americans are not alone in preferring look-at-me forenames. Everyone, it seems wants to be unique. *U-Neek* and *Mike-L* have been spotted. Sociology can explain why such odd identities are chosen.

What is a Dialect and What is a Language?

Despite the search for uniqueness, people also increasingly identify with ethnic and social entities and name themselves and present themselves accordingly. Though dialects may be different from what they were in the US a generation or a century ago, there are, due to improved education and communication, still a lot of American variations as well as a lot of so-called foreign languages spoken in these United States, from Armenian to Zimbabwean. We embrace many people of different origins and to different degrees. All these people have to some extent clustered and created area variations and have been sources of an extremely varied lexicon of American English, so that they contribute to many dialects. It’s not just pronunciation. Some denizens of our Second City proudly speak Chicagoan, which has its peculiar meanings for some words (*prairie*=overgrown city lot) and *tree*=three, *funchroom*=frontroom, *sammich*=sandwich, as well as *over by dere* and other speech also found elsewhere (*youse guys*, *pop*=soda, *goes*=says).

A dialect is the language of a group, usually defined by area, therefore called areal by the experts. What is a language and what is a dialect? A dialect is a variety of a language. A language is a collection of more or less mutually intelligible dialects. “The distinction between kindred dialects and kindred languages is a matter of degree,” declared Whatmough. “The test is intelligibility.” Swiss German and Pennsylvania Dutch (Deutsch) are dialects of the German language. Flemish can be called a dialect of Dutch or a language, as can Africaans. Haitian is not a dialect of French; Haitian is a creole language. The other, minority, language spoken in Haiti must be called Haitian French. Vermont French and Cajun French in Louisiana are dialects. So is Cajun English. I suppose that both Puerto Rican Spanish and “Porto Rican” English (especially Nuyorican) can be called dialects of the US.

The old joke goes: a language is a dialect with an army. The US is a country with its own armed forces as well as cultural forces and so there is a language which might have been called Usonian but is called—to the annoyance of Canada and Mexico, because they share North America with the US—American. Generally, however, Huttites can speak with Mormons and Haitian followers of *voudon* (voodoo). Cambodians and Cubans, Hmong and Tibetans are learning to speak to the descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers. The

Cubans who think of themselves as exiles in Florida are slow to learn American; their children, who expect to stay and be Americans, may speak Spanish-influenced Miami English. The Mexican-Americans who maintain ties with Mexico and may even hope to go home some day see less of a need to learn American than, say, the Dominicans who are here to stay. They may speak (say) Sonoran or Jalisco Mexican here.

From the start, language on the American continents north and south, as well as in Meso-America (the central part that connects the two large land masses) was a matter of many tongues. Difficulties of travel kept people apart. That preserved their individualities. Languages and dialects developed until there were hundreds or thousands of them, each being the mark and the pride of a group who in their own tongue usually described themselves as “The People”. It was only the white man who gave them French names such as *Huron* (for a wild hairdo) and *Gros Ventres* (Big Bellies), English names such as Blackfoot (for their moccasins) and Civilized Tribes, etc.

How!

The Amerindians did not see themselves as owning this or that area; they were partners with nature, not proprietors of it. So they did not have nations dependent like ours on land borders despite the fact that they had their settlements and traditional ranging and hunting grounds. Their nations were basically nations of shared language. Those who were “allies” or “enemies” spoke differently. Usually tribes and nations preferred to be left alone, sometimes having to form confederations to get the power to enjoy that privilege.

The aboriginal peoples may have had only a few basic language families. Some experts posit just three, but then the experts get confused by what is called “isolates,” languages that just don’t fit into their neat theories. However, even with red, yellow, and blue one can create a lot of different shades. So a lot of different systems developed. The distances between people, among other factors, led to a great deal of variation even within a language group. To communicate, and lacking a written language that was anything more than pictures, Amerindians in North America took to sign language. With that they could deal with other tribes, other nations here. In Central and South America there was a so-called international set of glyphs with which speakers of 15 different languages could write and read. Only lately have we learned to read those symbols.

The Languages of the European Invaders

Dialect enters importantly into what happened to English and other foreign languages here. People who were well placed and comfortable in European society might put up some cash to back expeditions to the New World in the hope of profit, but such people were highly unlikely to venture into inhospitable regions themselves. They stayed home, safe and sound. The adventurers who set out were often people who had nothing to lose but their lives and much to gain (they hoped). They were not the educated in their home societies. They came, for instance, from a desolate part of Spain, not the sophisticated

capital where courtiers lisped (it was said) in imitation of a king with a speech impediment. Spaniard *conquistadores* took with the sword and the cross odd dialects of the Spanish language into the Americas. They spoke regional Dutch or provincial French, etc.

The Dutch, the French, and the British also made grabs for American empires. Their explorers and settlers brought their languages here. But the French who arrived were seldom from Paris, the British seldom from London. They spoke their dialects to the natives and they wrote down what they heard, such as native placenames, as they heard them. That accounts for them getting the same placename wildly wrong in various European languages. Important point: the dialect you speak has a lot to do with the way you render phonetically anything unfamiliar that you hear spoken. You would get a quite different rendering of the name we now know as *Oregon* (for example) if you were (say) French or British and spoke the dialect of (say) Normandy or Devon. Moreover, people from London and people from Norfolk or Scotland might render the same Amerindian word in different ways, maybe very different ways.

The American Dialect became the American Language

The English language as it developed in the Americas diverged, without the news media of today, without easily available dictionaries, etc., more and more from the way the King's English was spoken by Britain's educated classes. It still was more or less intelligible to the British at home and so it was said that American English was a dialect of British English. The British entertained some Americans visiting London to learn the civilized ways and the British sent to America various emissaries of their culture to set up and lead American education. Sometimes this worked out rather oddly. One president of the College of New Jersey (later named Princeton, for William of Orange) was a Scot. I find it hard to imagine what kind of English he taught to the sons of southern plantation owners, white boys mostly brought up by black nannies and surrounded by black servants at home. Early Princetonian freshmen like James Madison, arriving in New Jersey for polish, usually spoke some brand of what today we might call Black English. College kids had to be straightened out and taught to speak the proper English demanded in the Church of England, because Harvard, then Yale (founded by deserters from Harvard), then Princeton (founded by New Light Presbyterians driven out of Yale), and other early colleges here were essentially seminaries for the Anglican clergy. Preachers had to sound Anglican. Today there are a number of versions of that which we might call High Church, Low Church, and Episcopal.

The Scholarship on the Development of English

To explain exactly what Protestant divines did to form Massachusetts English or Virginia English, what happened here to the so-called standard British English imported from London—not to mention the addition to our vocabulary of Amerindian words for things such as *canoe* and animals such as *possum*—would be an immense task. It would

involve little less than researching and writing the entire history of the English and their neighbors in the New World.

If you are not a specialist and simply would like to be challenged as a reader, if you do not wish to research the past but might be intrigued to see a couple of modern literary men guessing at what might happen to British English in the future, read Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* and Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*. They are in invented dialects of English.

Burgess was always very interested in language: he wrote an excellent book about James Joyce. Burgess devised a Primitive Indo-European language for early humans in the film *Quest for Fire*, and he wrote a supposed memoir of an actor friend of Shakespeare in a novel called *Nothing Like the Sun*, written in impressive Elizabethan English. Burgess in *A Clockwork Orange* (which had to have a glossary of hard words) guessed that British English of the future might be bent out of shape under the influence of Russian. At that time, Russia seemed to be a permanent big world power.

Russell Hoban wrote of a far more distant future, a time when nuclear holocaust had long ago destroyed almost all of British institutions and left the language in ruins. Hoban's boy hero and his friends speak a language that is difficult for the modern reader to translate into English as we know it now. To read *Riddley Walker* is almost as challenging as to cope with the wordplay of James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*. But not quite, and it is a far more exciting read. You should try it.

In modern literature, realism has fostered the use of dialects in creative writing, and has played all kinds of tricks with dialect, using it not only for characterization and satire but also gussying it up for poetic drama, whether in the Irish theater (John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*) or the American theater (Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*) or paring it down for a stylish if artificial lingo. That was used by Dashiell Hammett in fiction and copied by Ernest Hemingway, another mannerist of the hard-boiled school. Recently we have had the hard-hitting dramatic dialogue of David Mamet, copied by many, even himself on occasion. It might be said that American literature is more dependent upon dialects, or even ideolects (Huck Finn, Augie March, Holden Caulfield, and the gothic creations of southern women, including black ones), and also more dependent on slang and wordplay, than real American life is. Foreigners who read American books may not realize our dialects are often inaccurately reported as were, for instance, German-American and Irish-American and Yiddish-American in the days of vaudeville. At that time ethnic dialects were a comic staple. That was in the time of The Melting Pot, and immigrants were supposed to learn American ways and speak American. Today's multicultural society in the US is more tolerant of difference. English Only or even Standard American are less popular ideas.

Standards in Language

It was once believed that every language had an ideal state, and that one could perfect and then freeze a language. The French and Spanish academies still seem to believe this.

When the Continentals set up such academies for language, however, the British set up a royal society for science. The British knew what real progress was all about.

Some older British English was assisted to stabilize or at least slow down change and minimize variation when printing came along: William Caxton, the first printer in Britain, had to choose from available spellings of a word. He did not always do that consistently. Dictionary makers did. Books helped to establish London English as central, the way Dante's Tuscan became basic Italian. Dr. Samuel Johnson's eighteenth-century dictionary helped to stabilize. Useful also were certain basic texts which were handed down from generation to generation, such as *The Book of Common Prayer* and The Bible in the King James Version, the plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Milton, and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In the post-catastrophe world of *Riddley Walker* mentioned above, Russell Hoban assumes the standardizing texts and societal systems have been almost completely destroyed. Biblical language is in scraps. A new language is being built from the detritus of the old and without any institutions that try to regularize and standardize. Naturally intelligibility between dialects is to be sought, for communication, and dialects which bring penalty of prejudice are ideally modified or eliminated, for social cohesion.

But America is content to be diverse. We suffer no world of post-holocaust Britain of the *Riddley Walker* sort. American has changed, slowly, sometimes resisting efforts to speed up the change (such as Noah Webster's spelling reforms, which really did not catch on) after independence from Britain. Once, from the Englishman's point of view, America was British North America (Canada) and the American colonies. Colonies were expected to act and speak provincially. Americans were expected to pick up *sachem* from the Amerindians, *prairie* from the French, even manufacture *buckaroo* (from Spanish *vaquero*, "cowboy"). What the English in England didn't like was Americans using *mad* for "angry" and not "insane" or *bluff* in a new sense as a geographical term and also employing so many contractions, like *don't* (which is perfectly good English), and using *utilize* (not even spelled with an *s*).

To diehard Brits, the US is still regarded as a lost colony, speaking a rather barbarous dialect because broken off from the Motherland. That is connected to the reason that the major organization studying what is now the American language is called the American Dialect Society (ADS). ADS was founded more than a century ago and still bears that old label. The journal of ADS, however, is not *Dialect Notes* but *American Speech*. H. L. Mencken's standard work (in several volumes) is called *The American Language*.

The British have or had the concept of The Queen's (or The King's) English, regarded as correct. Lord Reith was a Scotsman and himself spoke a Scottish dialect and not London English but when he came to control British broadcasting he required the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to speak a standard BBC English. Today the BBC and BBC-TV broadcast in a variety of dialects. Today we are likewise getting away from saying "England" when we mean "Britain". Wales and Scotland and part of Ireland have devolved or declared independence and love their own languages. Britain is no longer equated with London and its environs as it pretty much used to be, nor is the language of

the capital area still *the* British tongue, if indeed it ever was. The redbrick and polytechnic educational institutions of the UK and the dialects they speak are challenging Oxbridge when it comes to the definition of educated British speech. Odd, innit?

The idea of a London standard—or one of the London dialects as standard—gave birth to the idea of a standard stage English. That once was pushed on Americans by elocution teachers. It was the cultivated way of speaking. Teachers had to pass elocution tests for accreditation. All that is gone. What some may call dialect is sometimes only careless speech, *gradge* or *gratch* for “garage”. (The British picked up *garage* from the French and as they habitually mangle French it is *GAR-ridge*, stress on the wrong syllable, as in *BRO-sure* and *PAT-tee*). Americans often speak rather carelessly; in fact, enunciating precisely is often thought of as prissy. But “Mercans” understand each other when they say: “Jeetyet?” “Why you no get marry?” “Dat mofuh diss’ me so Ah oftim.” New Yorkers can make their city’s name sound like the capital of what used to be Greenland: Nuuk (Noo-UK), while NOO-uk is Newark.

RADA’s Stage English is now is said to be a bit “fruity,” belonging to “knights in tights”. It is fading in popularity. It was given a big push offstage by the Kitchen Sink and subsequent schools of gritty realistic drama. Its tortured vowels are good mostly for sonorous Shakespeare.

The Bard requires a lot of different stage accents, mostly for underlings. British actors developed an all-purpose and entirely artificial peasant dialect for Shakespeare and other dramatists. They call it Mummersetshire dialect. Well into the twentieth century, British dramas used to employ comic maids with funny (usually Cockney) ways of speaking. It was snobbish. It remains a black mark against the *refained* (would-be refined) middleclass social climbers.

Today American actors speak some kind of American and many British stage personalities speak (say) East End London dialect or Welsh English or even a sort of Pakistani English or African English. Various commercial and cultural considerations have made the dialects of a number of underclass groups familiar on the large and small screens and in popular literature. Everyone knows that there are still in British English, as in all languages, literary and social dialects with more or less prestige and there are professional speech patterns. There is even a High Church way of sermonizing that is cruelly mocked and yet persists. There is a bumbling Colonel Blimp stutter for the military. There is a presenter patter for TV. Monty Python made fun of all that. It is less often remarked—Americans shun discussions of class—that we have a similar idiocies in the US. Our announcers put the emphasis *on* the preposition when reading the news *off*—pause—the teleprompter. People who regard The South as backward are uncomfortable with the fact that airline pilots make announcements very often in Southern accents.

Ways of Speaking

Today's multicultural societies, quite apart from entertainment gimmicks and professional jargons and slang fads, admit of a great many different ways of speaking. We have stopped laughing at the language of lawyers and at physicians who use *protocol* incorrectly and *loved one* has replaced *corpse*. Medical personnel for various reasons have invented *oncology* and *phlebotomist* and a new meaning of *intervention*. We expect politicians to appeal to constituents across the country in their own dialects—and to speak nonsense most of the time, as Orwell warned that they like to do. There are southerners, Texans, Massachusetts speakers such as Sen. Kennedy (and the comic mayor on *The Simpsons*) who sound ridiculous to the majority of Americans.

A completely Received Standard would be a good thing, I suppose, but I do not think any country has one. Parisian French and Berlin German are not totally accepted across those countries. One could get to be president of India and still be unable to speak either Hindi or English. One could get to be president of Germany and speak Bavarian. One can become president of the US and sound like Texas. It has been done more than once.

Dialects and Sociodynamics

One dialect or another may be regarded by some or by many as the standard. That is wrong. In fact, no dialect can truly be said to be sub-standard. When we say that a person speaks dialect or speaks with an accent we simply reveal that the person does not speak as we do—but who says that the way we speak is superior? It may be, granted. Some people say *yes* rather than *eyah* or *yep*. All men (and women) are not equal even in our democracy, and some ways of speaking go with more privileged backgrounds, education, and social position. There are, whether we like it or not, race and social accents (areal only in terms of rich or poor neighborhoods and America's increasingly gated communities) and in a class-ridden society one has only to open one's mouth to make some people accept or despise one.

The poor may sometimes in US society grow up to be rich but we all tend to stay with the dialect we learned at home, before we went to school, although some schools are deliberately chosen by parents to make their offspring speak in a "better" way. School must have some effect on the way we speak and can even teach us to speak differently from our parents. In Britain in the public schools (which are private, expensive, snobbish) and in the US (where private schools are more expensive and more snobbish with a snobbery derived more from bankbooks than breeding), and in similar privileged places, scholars acquire the stamp of the school dialect. There used to be more talk of the Winchester or Eton dialect in Britain, of Oxford English and Cambridge English, and here in the US of the Harvard "accent". We have always had such things.

I found a nineteenth century book on Princeton student English and I noted that, in the middle of the twentieth century, my fellow students at Princeton had a different slang and slightly different pronunciation. They had their own way of claiming affiliation with Princeton. It costs a lot to go to an Ivy League school and Americans like to show off expensive purchases, even if it means someone else's monogram on their clothes.

We are all aware of other people's peculiar speech and may play with that by using quotation marks or "quote unquote" or raise and wiggle two fingers of each hand, imitating what Americans call *quotation marks* and the British call *inverted commas* inaccurately for in " " and even ' '—which the British use in the first instance, unlike Americans--only half of the commas are, as the British would say *actually, in point of fact* inverted).

We adopted our various marks of punctuation somewhere along the way. In that and in more crucial aspects, as time passes all speech changes. Some old dialects are dead except for special purposes, just as some languages are dead except in liturgy. Some old dialects occur chiefly in jokes. Others with a long history have not yet changed entirely. The dialects of Boston remain pretty much what they were a fairly long time ago. Boston American (at least of the Boston Brahmin rather than the Southie sort) sounds "English" to many Americans, especially because of the missing *r* ("pahk the cah"). The *rs* "saved" in *Ha'va'd* and that sort of thing are shifted to words such as *idear*. Pres. Kennedy always referred to *Cuber*.

The dialects of New York City, Detroit, Dallas, and Los Angeles, for instance, have changed notably in living memory. Even "Rachizter" (Rochester, New York) is changing; maybe "Baldemer" (Baltimore, Maryland) is changing some. I recall when LA was Los- ANG-e-lees; today it is Los-ANGE-e-lis. Most people say *LOS* Vegas (but *vegas* = meadows taking the feminine *las* in Spanish. The Valley Girl vocabulary and the tentative rise of the voice at the end of sentences that are not interrogatory are well known and, to some extent, *dude* (*dood, dyude*), have crept East, at least among the young.

You hear *dude* and *hell-OOO* and *SO over* in Manhattan now, among serfs if not surfers. In New York we have pretty much lost that famous "Brooklyn accent" I mentioned. It used to be mocked in verses such as these:

Duh Spring giz sprung,
Duh grazz ziz riz.
Oi wunner ware
Da boidies iz.
Duh boid is on duh wing? Absoid!
I tot duh wing wuz on duh boid.

Today the Dutch and even the Irish are thin on the ground in Brooklyn. They have moved away, like many of the Jews, although the latter may be responsible for pronunciations by many non-Jews such as *Lawn Guyland*. Brooklyn is now one of large world conurbations with a huge black population. A real Brooklyn accent, I suppose, would have the lilt of The Islands and the words of the ghetto now made widely familiar by rappers and somewhat used by whites. Detroit now has so many African-Americans that you will hear a lot of so-called southern speech there, God willin' an' the creek don' rise. Most of Los Angeles is Hispanic. Even heterosexuals today are speaking in San Francisco a bit of what we may call Gay American, Eureka Valley having become The Castro. Meanwhile, in Appalachia, they still say "et" for "ate," like some of their British ancestors. There are many old Scotch-Irish words and expressions still alive in the Deep

South where people are not as much in touch with modern times as the rest of America is, but it is wrong to imagine that “Elizabethan English” is spoken anywhere there.

Elizabethan English has recently been tried for a Shakespeare production at the new Globe (built to look Elizabethan). Elizabethan English dropped initial *hs* and final *gs* (today considered low class) and made three syllables of *Asia* and *Christian* and probably would sound Irish to you; “Upon this charge/Cry ‘God for England, Harry, and St. George [*Jarge*].”

“Plain American”

Americans tend drop the *h* in *herb* (and in *what*, *where*, etc.). Many drop the final *g* (*walkin’ n’ talkin’*) and confuse *d* and *t* (*dese n’ dose*), and lots of *ts* disappear, even with a glottal stop (*bo’le o’ milg* and a *fly a’enden* on airplanes) and most people say Americans are loud and that the English mumble. American is reported by foreigners to sound flat, not musical like Italian.

Some people say flat American comes from the Midwest or even that Ohio American is a standard. They speak of the “Texas accent,” though there are many of those, and one would be well advised to master the local one before seeking election to any specific office in The Lone Star State from dogcatcher to governor. There are black and white and Mexican Texan accents as well.

People may even argue that African-Americans have their own language, not a dialect but a language called Black English, Ebonics, or African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). Granted, many, certainly not all, African-Americans speak that—but so do some whites. It is one dialect (not language) that points up the connections between language and ethnicity, language and identity, and language and social acceptance or the lack of it, all of which has a lot to do with getting a well-paying job. Some people would define any dialect as sub-standard.

AAVE is a dialect which, like all dialects, differs from other dialects not only in accent (pronunciation) and spelling (orthography) but also in the morphology, the social status, the syntax and the semantics, and what we may call the tune. In connection with the latter, think of accents we say are lilting and the habit of some West Indian or Wild West or West Coast people. The Californian tune is imitated especially among the young all over the country [rising inflection at the end].

But let’s get down to brass tacks. That rhymes with “facts”, as in Cockney Rhyming Slang but it is considered to be a very American expression. Let’s get, as long ago promised, to Philadelphia.

The City of Brotherly Love

In Philly—the natives do not mind the abbreviation, though people in San Francisco hate the use of Frisco--there are a number of dialects but chiefly what we may call North

Philly and South Philly. There are also what we might call City Philly and Philly Suburb. Experts claim to be able to tell whether you come from North Philadelphia or South Philadelphia just by asking you to say a few sentences. In the case of Philly, that really does not require the expertise of a Prof. Higgins in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. That is because the northern and southern parts of Philadelphia have long held distinct immigrant populations and the foreign languages they spoke on arrival have made their mark on the American language they learned. Germans in North Philly. Italians in South Philly.

There are parts of New Jersey where the Italians or the Germans or some other group settled so the local speech still betrays this even if the demography has radically changed. The most recognized New Jersey accent is that on TV's *The Sopranos*. There can also be said to be a less specific, an all-purpose, Mafia lingo for national and literary use. What the Irish kids spoke in the novels of James T. Farrell or what the Puerto Ricans (usually POR-to RICK-ens or REE-kins) spoke in Piri Thomas' work may not now be heard in the same neighborhoods as the ones those novelists depicted.

Over time neighborhoods have altered, and the reputation of Philadelphia has altered. We used to consider the citizens of Philadelphia smart. Think of the old slang's fast-talking, devious "Philadelphia lawyer". Today the inhabitants are not thought to be so uppity, so Quaker, or so clever. New Yorkers who used to think Philadelphia sophisticated now say it is full of rubes. (*Reuben* was once thought to be a typical backwoods or hick name.) New Yorkers (among others) say Philly Phokes talk funny. Well, perhaps not the wealthy Main Line people—*Main Line* refers to the railroad—but most people in Philly. Philly is the land of Philly cheese steak sandwiches and hoagies, which elsewhere in the country may be called submarines or torpedoes (from the shape of the loaf), heroes (or Italian heroes, or even Garibaldis) or something Italian like Sorrento, grinders or chompers, or just po' boy sandwiches ("po'" for "poor" points to a Deep South origin of the term). Different places, different names. A soda fountain in New England may serve a frappe, a phosphate, or pop or even "I scream".

You see that each different name creates a regional identification and a membership in the region that even in very mobile US society tends to cling, as to childhood memories. You see that dialect, like all language, involves psychological factors often ignored by philologists. With all their attention to "the speech act" they miss that, just as they have yet to get to what I might clumsily call the "speech non-act". How I would love to be able to write insightfully about what different American groups and classes *refrain* from addressing, not simply words that are "unspeakable" at certain levels and in certain situations but the codes of when to speak and when to remain silent! That would be very pioneering and exciting venture into sociolinguistics!

In Filluduffyah (which is about how the natives pronounce the placename), *car* is "caur," *core* is "coor," and *ferry* is "furry". As in Baltimore, in Philly the *r* is always sounded both before a consonant and at the end of a word, which is not the case in some dialects of the East Coast, such as Boston or New York City. (In Brooklyn *her* can be

huh.) Naturally there are localisms, vocabulary being one easy way of speaking about dialects or variant speech. That is what the Germans call *Sprachvarietäten*.

Consider these Phillyisms: *anymore* (currently), *bag* (skip, as in *bag school*), *square* (city block), *yo* (“hey there”—but seldom in lieu of “yes,” as is found some other places), and the commoner and generally derogated *youse* plural “you”). From the earliest friends of founder William Penn, Philly retains the UK for “sidewalk,” *pavement*. It also probably has some local words, particularly new slang, the rest of us have not heard yet. Older words you won’t know unless you are from a certain corner of Pennsylvania are *metzel soup*, *mist*, and *moshey*.

Coining Words

Every word, including every slang word, of a language was originally a neologism (new word) in some local dialect. It may spread or just flourish locally for a while and then die. The useful or amusing words advance into a more general vocabulary of the language. But every very word starts as a local coinage.

Every word is a clue to thought, to history. In personal names you can trace old occupations (*Brewster*, *Chandler*, *Webster*) and in the more recent forenames you can see the weakening of the hold of religion (there are no Christian saints to protect you when you are given *Mackenzie*, *Brooke*, or *Jason*). In placenames you can trace the migrations of people, determine settlement patterns, discern sentiments (*Liberty*, *Providence*, *Union*). In scientific neologisms you can learn of great physicists (*ampere*, *ohm*, *volt*, *watt*) and physicians (*Alzheimer’s disease*, *Parkinson’s disease*, *Hippocratic oath*) and you can trace the history of invention: seismograph (1900), electric typewriter (1901—a typewriter was originally a person who typed), speedometer (1902), barbiturate (1903), novocaine (1904), and so on. In product names you can find Erector set (1901), Geiger counter (1913), Band-Aid (1920), Muzak (1922), Scotch Tape (1930s), Dacron (1940s), Tylenol (1950), ATM (1960s), VHS (1970s), CD-ROM (1980s), World Wide Web (1990s)... In everyday language you can perceive the *Weltlansicht* (German for world view) of an individual or a whole people. *Band-aid* describes any temporary fix.

Local conditions naturally affect local speech. Even the weather counts; you may speak through your nose if it is cold, and if the weather is hot you usually want to slow down and drawl. Racial differences in lips and other physical features govern how you form and deliver sounds. In these days of diversity, we may say we welcome multiculturalism and a rainbow of colors and cultures, but the truth of the matter is that we find the fact that however much all men (and women) were created equal we, in these united states, are embarrassed by the incontrovertible fact that there are many differences between folks in the eyes of humanity if not of God. We are all Americans, and all ethnics, too.

Ethnic humor, and ethnic ways of speaking—for and about some kinds of ethnics only, it must be noted—are often taboo. Myron Cohen was tossed off television because his Jewish jokes were considered anti-Semitic. Some black comedians are permitted to

joke about African America where white comedians cannot, and blacks say things in rap that would get whites arrested if turned the other way. Racial segregation and other sorts of social sorting still continue. This is true in language, too. We are both determined and dismayed by this. We speak, one might say, with discrimination in at least one sense.

Discrimination leaves us rather disquieted (a mite uneasy, like) because Americans now are not as permitted to laugh at people who “talk funny” as they were earlier. There was a time when prejudice against whole categories of people from Amerindians and Catholics to Germans and Jews was OK. It was a time when the population was on the whole far less urbanized and educated, but they did get the basics even in the one-room school house and the school marm made them read and write correctly. They held spelling bees. That equipped the general public to laugh at spelling errors and they guffawed when dialect humor became all the rage. Unnecessarily odd spellings such as *awf*, *cloze*, *dawg*, *iz*, *lawzt*, *tawk*, appeared to amuse, as did *git*, *tink*, and *wery*. So did the high-falutin’ lingo of the over-educated and pedantic or self-educated and pompous. (One of the funniest current accents is overcorrected African American speech as practiced by Maria Angelou or Jessye Normand but some people think Black Bible-Pounding Baptist just as ridiculous.) Making fun of the way people speak is not polite. However, it was very common in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century satire and joke-telling and fiction and it came to be a reliable source of fun in drama and in vaudeville. A lot of the humor was cruel but behind it all was the message that Americans had better think and speak like Americans and get rid of their immigrant baggage.

Films and radio and television did not eradicate speech differences and homogenize America; they simply seem to have given us more opportunity to see how varied the speech of Americans can be. Also, ethnic groups and even gays and other alleged communities or political pressure groups have been able to insist that they be represented in the media, with at least some of their language peculiarities not for mockery but for color and realism. Quotas are set up.

Way Down upon the Swanee River

The country’s dialect geography is confusing, just like that Southern song written by a Yankee and made famous by a New York Jew of Russian background, but most Americans think in simple terms of north and south. There is an immense amount of scholarship on that great divide. I choose a little pamphlet by Mitchell (illustrated by “Scrawls”) That “Scrawls” is Sam C. Rawls’ *nom de plume*/crayon and it illustrates one of southern dialects features which we might call *scrunchin*: *arshtaters* “Irish potatoes,” *bleef* “belief,” *Co-coluh n Sebmup* “Coca-Cola and 7-Up” (*sawf dranks*), *earl* “aerial,” *smo* “some more,” *tahd* “tired,” *yawl* or *y’all* is “you all,” etc. Southerners also drop letters (no *l* in *hep*, *scuptah*, *wuf*) and in Dixie they stretch out words (*costes*, *fayun*, *greeuts*, *payun ov mah ain’t*) but frankly, Scarlett, they don’t give a *dayum*.

Southerners sometimes pronounce carelessly (*madge* “marriage”) and when following their own rules pronounce differently than do Yankees (formerly Damn Yankees). They

also have vocabulary that is peculiar (in one sense of the word this is not derogatory): *viEENa* is a vienna sausage, canned, or tinned, as the British say. There are expressions such as *he done gone change de tah on de Ose*, which is Olds for Oldsmobile.

The Late Unpleasantness (also known as War of Southern Independence, War between the States, War of Northern Aggression, even the Civil War) has not been forgotten. It is *standin' in the need of* improvement. Civil war in the nineteenth century was only the extreme expression of an abiding distaste by the north and south for each other and their ways. We can *plum say ratcheer* ("right here") that differences in speech *prolly hez sard* relations and *is give up to pechuate de DEE-vyde* between the *Muhkin norf* and the *sowf*. Y' heah?

Dialects can not *owny* divide one social class from another but one ethnic group or geographical locality from another. The geolinguistic emphasis on language and place is never more obvious than in the neighborhoods, sections, towns, cities, states, and countries and various language groups of the world.

Mitchell records speech examples and here is a *smatrin* of Mitchell's impression of *suvern speesh* unashamed and *unPOleazed*:

Ah've got somethin' in mah ah.
Jim's in the hospital...bad off.
That gal can't bawl water without burnin' it.
Ah think that light's bub's burnt out.
Ah'm gonna git shed o' it.
Sherman burnt Etlanta when he marched through Jawjya.
Ah liked to died.
Ah'll wash the dishes if you'll rench 'em.
That basebah wen' right [should be: plum] through the wenderlight.

Mitchell does not get into the way in which southern speech has affected the speech of the north, or *vice versa*. He does not pause to explain where Yankees got the false impression that all southerners say *y'all* or *you all* to single individuals. (It can only be used to address more than one.) He doesn't dwell on why some speech has been more mocked than others. Yankee English had more than its share of weirdness, especially in the nineteenth century. Mitchell does not even comment on the inventiveness of the South. Permit me to give just one example: the southern *dogbit* ("bitten by a dog"), which would be useful even in places where Americans are frostbitten. With Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the South seems to have invented the verb *dewater*. Before that *de water* was what *de levees* held back.

Texas Crude

Now I shall get specific about The Lone Star State, proudly singular. Texas was a republic on its own before it became part of the US and to some extent Texans still think of Texas as better if not bigger than the US. They have their own ways and words, differing over short distances in that big state. Dallas thinks of itself as The South and says you have to go 40 miles farther to get to The West (Fort Worth). Fort Worth really is

much more western than geography suggests. Texas is proud of its high-heeled boots, ten-gallon hats, and often wild and woolly ways. It reflects Texas pride in going whole hog on the Texas accent, just as (says Edna Ferber in *Giant*) “a certain type of Englishman becomes excessively Oxford or a Southern politician intensifies his drawl”.

In a book on “talkin’ Texan’,” Ken Weaver offers an uninhibited, uncensored introduction to *Texas Crude*. The foul-mouthed poetry of the oil fields and the redneck and cowboy cantinas is there in God’s plenty. Weaver asks if “are you being have?” (“are you behaving?”) is “an Elizabethan holdover”. He will make you howl at the egregious metaphors and stupendously inventive “dirty minds” of Texans and *Meskins* speaking Tex-Mex. *Pee-waddy beautimous* terms such as *dick-fingered* (maladroit) are the least of it. I wish I could quote more but it’s vulgar. *Pin for pen* (as in “*pinsil*”) is just one feature of Texas English. It does sound southern, a *pissant* bit. For the lexicon that is printable, consider *Juneteenth*, *lazy daisy*, *mayberry*, *mimbre*, *norther*, *Old Hannah*, etc. You can find those in a single volume of Cassidy’s *Dictionary of American Regional English*. But it has taken decades to print the interview material of the ‘thirties. DARE is still unfinished and woefully out of date. You won’t find a lot you know from NYC.

In New York City a single factor such as rent control (with little profit for landlords owning old buildings and high prices for apartments in new buildings and converted lofts) has made an area around Orchard and Ludlow streets in the Lower East Side. These gentrified streets are not far on the other side of Houston from *Loisada*, which is what the many Spanish-speakers named it. Below Houston (as in SoHo to the west) is a very different speech community than was there just a few years ago; it is totally unlike the Jewish and other immigrant speech community there long ago. Some miss that—but that’s okey-dokey, as the Lower East Side Jews used to say, translating from Yiddish, by me.

Dialect Humor

Volatile speech communities like languages can never be described except partially and narrowly historically. History does show us certain aspects of dialect, actual or torted up (all dolled up) by writers. One aspect easy to illustrate can be suggested briefly with a few sample quotations from humorous works of the American period when dialect and aytroushus speling was a major tool of the “phunny phellers”.

Well, now everybody says it [an election] has turned out jest as that queer little paper, the Daily Courier, said ’twould. The paper said it was such a close run it couldn’t hardly tell which side would beat. And it’s jest so, for they’ve been here most a fortnight acting jest like two boys playing see-saw on a rail.

---Seba Smith [Maine dialect]. *To Cousin Ephraim Downing* (1830)

Smiley was monstrous proud of his frog, and well he might be, for fellers that had traveled and been everywheres, all said he laid over any frog that ever *they* see.

Well, Smiley kep' the beast in a little lattice box, and he used to fetch him down sometimes and lay for a bet. One day a feller—a stranger in the camp, he was—come acrost him with his box, and says:

“What might it be that you’ve got in that box?”

And Smiley says, sorter indifferent-like, “It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, maybe, but it ain’t—it’s only just a frog.”

And the feller took it, and looked at it careful, and turned it round this way and that, and says, “H’m—so ’tis. Well, what’s *he* good for?”

“Well,” Smiley says, easy and careless, “he’s good enough for *one* thing, I should judge—he can outjump any frog in Calaveras County.”

--“Mark Twain,” *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* (1865)

“That frind iv ye’ers, Dugan, is an intilligent man,” said Mr. Dooley. “All he needs is an index an’ a few illushtrations to make him a bicyclopedia iv useless information.”

“Well, said Mr. Hennessy, judiciously, “he ain’t no Soc-rates an’ he ain’t no answers-to-questions colum; but he’s a good man that goes to his jooty, an’ as handy with a pick as some people are with a cocktail spoon. What’s he been doin’ agin ye?”

“Nawthin’,” said Mr. Dooley, “but he was in here Choosday. ‘Did ye vote?, says I....’ ‘I voted fer Carter Haitch,’ says he. ...’ ‘Why, man alive, I says, ‘Charter Haitch was assassinated three years ago,’ I says. ‘Was he?.’ says Dugan, ‘Ah, well, he’s lived that down be this time’....

--Finley Peter Dunne [Chicago Irish], *Mr. Dooley in Peace and War* (1898)

So de Ferry sad, “You Keeng Mitas???”

So de Keeng sade, “So wot is???”

So de Ferry sad, “I’m a Ferry wot I could grent you wot annyting wot you’ll weesh so’ll be foolfeeled de weesh!!”

So de Keeng sad, “Wot kind bunco-steerage game you call dees, huh? You got maybe some goot-for-notting Hoil Stocks wot you want to sell it, ha, maybe? Odder a petent carpet-swipper, odder maybe a phuny Gold mine yat, ha! Try batter by Old Keeng Cole, not by me—Goot hefternoon!”

So de Ferry sad, “Hm—you a werry septical poison, ha? Soppose wot you geeve me a hoppportunity I should conweence you?”

So de Keeng sad, “Ho K, I weesh wot averytng wot I toch it, it should toin into gold.”

--Milt Gross [Yinglish] *Nize Baby* (1926)

For more American dialects used for humor, see the treasure house of *Huckleberry Finn*. The numerous dialects, black and white, that “Mark Twain” reports are all exactly recorded.

Sources of Dialects

As with real estate, first and foremost location, location, location. But there are other factors as well. Each piece of US literature, with the exception of the quirkiest of self-absorbed poems, creates as well, while great poets such as e. e. cummings and John Ashbery have ingeniously mined everyday American speech even for highly original tongues of their own.

You understand that dialects arise from a number of sources. The easiest to spot are the following. First, ignorance of the rules of grammar and spelling, etc, though that can create some wonderful expressions or create new words, such as *Statutarius* and *iffinmaybe*. Second, careless speech, which produces *preseate* and such obscenities as *mofuh*. Third, interference from foreign languages: in some African languages for *good, better, best* simply say the equivalent of *good, good good, good good good*; some infants generate the same kind of thing in English. Fourth, direct translation : Gaelic *tá eagla orm* is “I fear” in English but literally “Fear is upon me”. So Spanish might explain why someone says “it fell from me” instead of “I dropped it” and Irish descent may cause someone who does not speak Gaelic at all to say in English “It’s himself who is after arriving”. Germans and Yiddish speakers might say in English “What’s not to like?”

English spelling looking so arbitrary and so difficult, misspelling is an obvious mark of foreignness or ignorance. Any fool with a dictionary can criticize the spelling of another. I think the emphasis on correct spelling has something to do with what Thorsten Veblen discussed in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*: mastering spelling (and in general speaking with correctness) proves you are upper-class enough to have had the spare time and the training to learn the arbitrary. Being a good speller shows you are disciplined and have been drilled in the basics. Being correct in your language (however and by whomever correctness is defined) doesn’t prove you are more intelligent or a better person. Being incorrect gives superficial people a stick with which to beat you, that’s all.

In the early days of our republic we worried a lot about spelling but American oratory and American writing suffered most not from ignorant errors but from the inflation that comes with self-education and self-importance. We were “intoxicated with the exuberance of our own verbosity”. We had a tendency to pontificate (the unintended and baleful influence of long sermons) and to prefer the long word to the short, a sure sign of bad education and bad taste. As cheap furniture is often elaborately tacky, so the tasteless and pompous are likely to prefer “individuals resident in domiciles of patent frangibility perforce must eschew the utilization of petrous formations projectile-wise” to “people who live in glass houses should not throw stones”.

We foolishly were impressed by the Americans who used “two-dollar” words and could spell the usually useless ones featured in spelling bees. We laughed at the sincere and gauche country bumpkins, but the so-called educated were really the most risible. Ridiculous rhetorical flourishes stretch from the Declaration of Independence go onward—“a more perfect union”? how can anything be “more perfect”? they meant “more nearly perfect,” I suppose. The errors of those who dropped out of school, or didn’t get much out of school, are more to be pitied than censured, or censored.

The *dokymenz* deliberately misspelled by such early humorists as “Artemus Ward,” “Petroleum V. Naseby,” “Josh Billings,” “Orpheus C. Kerr” [Office Seeker] and such (note that they hid under pseudonyms, thus confessing that what they were doing was not completely serious, or even respectable) are no longer amusing. There is great wisdom in Mr. Dooley and his kind but translating it is a chore now, so Finley Peter Dunne’s penetrating mind goes unrecognized. Chanjafadz wul getcha efya don washowt.

What is more ridiculous than the would-be superior person who makes an error when mocking the errors of the great unwashed? A lot of mockery of early American (and other dialects) as incorrect is itself inaccurate, and facile. I would go so far as to say that all the truly lasting American writing so far is in somewhat odd dialects, from what I might call the Autodidact-Didactic style of Cooper and Melville—high among the great awkward prose writers of our literature, which also has Dreiser and Faulkner--to our wonderful southern women writers (Eudora Welty is my favorite among many I hold in awe) to the leading twentieth-century stylists such as Hemingway and Henry Miller and the latest realist triumphs of books and large and small screens.

“Is It Good for the Jews?”

Dialect is more than spelling or even pronunciation and lilt, much more than pointing up distance from the target language. Dialect can reveal the nature of the native language which colors it. You see the syntax of Yiddish, for instance, in Milt Gross, just as you understand the Jewish genius if you read Leo Rosten’s delightful books on “the joy of Yiddish” and his report of teaching immigrants English in *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N*, all of which deserve as many stars as Mr. Kaplan liked to out into his name. The Jewish mind and the Yiddish language even creep in when not *supposed* to raise a laugh, as in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (“Attention must be paid”). Attention must be paid to the dialect of the writers whose allegedly non-Jewish characters speak a sort of Jewish-American. Clifford Odets has a Chinese general in one of his plays talk Jewish-American. What’s with that? Plenty, already. What are you, crazy?

Even anti-Semites have to admit that so great has been the contribution of Jews to American literature, amazingly far beyond their proportion in the population, that the American language is rich in Yiddish contributions and the American sense of humor has been importantly shaped by the wisecracking and wry humor of Yiddish right up to Woody Allen, good, bad, both and beyond. The American worldview tends to be affected by the same Jewish mentality, even to thinking of ourselves as God’s Chosen People. Language leads thought. American literary criticism has benefited incomparably from the Jewish critics, schooled in picking at texts and outsider enough to understand the water in the bowl that the goldfish ignore. Our best literary critic was Edmond Wilson. He was not Jewish. But why don’t you make a list of the next dozen critics of importance. Mostly Jews or ex-Jews.

Don’t ignore religion’s effect even on the speech of lapsed Catholics and ex-Jews. Don’t forget that Americans started out as Old Testament people. To distance themselves

from the Roman Catholics, the early Protestants in the US not only made The Bible central and preaching the substitute for papist ritual—the Protestant pulpit has greatly affected the rhetoric of our writers such as William Faulkner—but Puritans even named their children after Old Testament characters rather than Catholic saints. On occasion they named their children by opening The Bible at random and found a word that became a name, whence even much later we had Learned Hand, Preserved Fish, and Faith Popcorn (who I believe isn't even Christian).

The Melting Pot

The phrase is from an early twentieth-century play by Israel Zangwill, not an American, but America used to be the melting pot supreme, drawing immigrants speaking all sorts of languages. Every language has its traditions and conventions, its theme and variations. Every set of immigrants has its own problems with American and brings its own spice to the gumbo. It must be remembered that there are various dialects within every ethnic group. There is no one uneducated English and no overall Ivy League English, or even one MIT or Stanford English, no single Mandarin or Nerd English, no single City Mouse and single Country Mouse American. Americans have learned to think not in absolutes (even right and wrong, male and female) but of continuums.

Then there are people of different colors (as if white were not a color). African-Americans come in all colors and conditions. To pigeonhole them all under B is stupid. There is not just one single African-American dialect (or language). We have, as I said, the insufferably “affected” and powerfully down to earth *down-home* preachers and *homies* and there are *da boyz of da 'hood* and rappers and the modern stereotypes in the Steppin Fetchit tradition along with members of the US Cabinet. Current Cabinet members who are black—actually partly black and partly white, like Andrew Young and most other African-Americans-- sound white. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. didn't sound white even as he preached in a style derived from the white evangelicals and such great white Americans as Jonathan Edwards. The Rev. Al Sharpton doesn't sound white. He probably could, but sounding black is part of his power, even as he forges ahead not without inspiration from Jewish and other white union leaders and other activists. Many revered African-American writers do not write white (though Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin famously did).

Today one can advance in politics and in the politics of literature sounding either way. It all depends. Dialect can be a cross to bear or a huge advantage, a way of (as we say) “playing the race card”. It all depends on the political situation because, never forget, all language is first local and always political.

Little Black Sambo and the Tar Baby

Meanwhile, few African-Americans still sound like our American Aesop, Joel Chandler Harris from Georgia, creator of immortal characters such as Brer [Brother] Rabbit. These lovable and instructive creatures have been eclipsed for the politically-correct moment. I read *Little Black Sambo* and had a golliwog when I was a child, but

that was long ago. Today children sensibly are provided with dolls the same color as themselves and in the books for kids we have to have a selection of ethnics.

Credit or blame the tides of taste. You know that the dialects of *Maggie and Jiggs*, the German *Katzenjammer Kids*, and *Pogo* and his southern friends, among others, have gone with the wind.

Most American comic strips have given way to Japanese. Right now even Disney would think twice about reviving their old Brer Rabbit movie and Pinocchio is o-u-t, because any character announcing he wants to be “a real boy” would get hoots from between 5% and 10% of the males in the audience and be booed vociferously by all the feminists. We are leery of ethnic stereotypes now, except in sit coms.

I veered off into that comment to tell you once more that there are in dialects, as well as in other things, swings of the pendulum. There are fashions; there are fads. Politics as well as language politics can make a dialect more or less acceptable, especially when the low overturns the high in a revolution of some sort. Just as there is a favored face for an era—think of the Gibson Girl or the Arrow Collar Man, both before your time, as well as the idols of your youth, maybe the Marlboro Man—so there can be a favored dialect when and where you live. Do you know what yours is? Can you explain why it is predominant? Can/do you speak it? Can/do you speak other dialects as well, or instead?

But back to Joel Chandler Harris. In his *Tar Baby Story* we hear Uncle Remus’ wisdom about how the clever outfox their oppressors and we hear also authentic black dialect. A sample of a once much-loved and now too neglected masterpiece:

“‘Skin me, Brer Fox,’ sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, ‘snatch out my eye balls, t’ar out my years by de roots. En cut off my legs,’ sezee, ‘but do please, Brer Fox, don’t fling me in dat brier-patch,’ sezee.

“‘Co’se Brer Fox wanten hurt Brer Rabbit bad ez he kin, so he cotch ’im by de behime legs en slung ’im right in de middle er de brier-patch. Dar wuz a considerbul flutter whar Brer Rabbit struck de bushes, en Brer Fox sorter hang ’roun’ fer ter see w’at wuz gwinter happen. Bimeby he hear somebody call ’im, an’ way up der hill he see Brer Rabbit settin’ cross-legged on a chinkapin log koamin’ de pitch outen his har wid a chip. Den Brer Fox know dat he bin swop off mighty bad. Brer Rabbit was bleedzed fer ter fling back some er his sass, en he holler out:

“‘Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox—bred en bawn in a brier-patch!’” en wid dat he skip out des ez lively ez a cricket in de embers.”

Talking American

We conclude here with a truism of our own: that, basically, most problems with dialects develop out of interactions with other dialects.

Let us respect the sovereignty of other people's dialects and, while affirming that some countries are bigger or better than others, more advanced or emerging or perhaps never likely to emerge at all, people have an inalienable right to live in them if they wish to do so.

That A-OK with you? And as long as you just hear it, you don't have to read it, you can figure out what is meant when someone says "Eyesore yer a plass cheer." Or maybe not. Dialects are easier to understand when spoken than when written, especially in our orthography, a point that in print I have to repeat often.

In all varieties of English, spelling is incredibly irregular. You probably know the story that George Bernard Shaw—a would-be reformer of English spelling and, like all such reformers, from Noah Webster until now, unsuccessful in achieving any real improvement—suggested that *fish* could be spelled *ghoti* by current rules: the *gh* as *f* (as in *rough*), the *o* and *i* as in *women*, and the *ti* as *sh* (as in *nation*).

So what you have here are not an arid sociolinguistic report but an essay which may tend to fit not the category of the stiffly scientific paper but the essay which Dr. Samuel Johnson defined as a "loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece, not a regular and orderly composition". Not too loose, not too irregular, I trust. Containing the personal thought of the writer and stimulating the personal thought of the reader, I hope, on how languages and dialects relate, telling you something new about American.

We Americans have been on our own since well before John Witherspoon coined the term *Americanisms* in 1781 to describe new meanings *mad* (angry), our "errors" (*knowed* in place of *knew*), and our pronunciations (our *a*, our *r*, our occasional *winder* for *window*).

Today American is the strongest international language. If America is going to be *the* world power then American is going to be *the* language of the empire. (How our republic became an empire is not something I want to discuss here.) John Algeo, working with and supplementing the lexicographical files of the late Allen Walker Read, is preparing a dictionary of *Briticisms* now. The British are putting a great many previously rejected American words into the staid *Oxford English Dictionary*. The British are the ones who speak English oddly, or so a lot of people feel today. There was a time when the editor of the English dictionary refused to include Americanisms. Now *Briticisms* are the peculiar and less valued words. Speak what our poet Marianne Moore called "plain American, which cats and dogs can read" to get ahead in the real world.

Now, if American is going to continue to function as the world's second language and perhaps even to increase its dominion, just which kind of American are foreigners best advised to learn?

The American to Acquire

Foreigners would like to know which dialect of American to learn. The one that most speakers of English elsewhere understand best, I think, is the one to acquire. There is much to be said for the idea that one should not only dress for the rank one wishes to attain but speak the language expected at that rank, too.

Our Joe Blow simply speaks differently from Britain's Joe Blow. I gave you a taste of Joe Blow, Joe Sixpack, Average Joe here and there. For more, see *Speaking Freely*, a "guided tour of American English" based on two books by lexicographer and US-o-phile Stuart Berg Flexner and adding 40% new material by others.

From what you read here or elsewhere, by myself here or in my contributions to Flexner or by anyone else anywhere, you yourself can surely cull some useful facts, reach some enlightening conclusions. Among those conclusions in connection with the present topic will be the following. Dialects are themselves not too loose and not too irregular. They are not regrettable departures from some scientific accuracy. There are a great many of them and the ways by which they are generated are not completely understood. The reasons for them are clear. Europe has a lot of different ways of speaking. So do we in America. It would be tedious to list them all. It is better, I think, to introduce the topic with a few, lightly handled.

All of the American dialects in English we lump together and call the American Language; it is a language with a very wide variety of dialects for a wide variety of people. In Whitmanesque way it encompasses multitudes. The three aspects are important. Dialects create in- and out-groups, distinguish social classes, stigmatize people who in the traditional American mobile way move from one area of the country to another and one social or economic class to another, and complicate the business of getting work where how you speak to customers and colleagues is considered crucial. Few newcomers to America can ever attain native command of the American language. The first generation will always be marked, and in some ethnic groups the number of somewhat marked following generations may be many. The dialect spoken may or may not gain a student the best educational opportunities. Indeed it might put a ceiling on career advancement. There are social and cultural, political and economic ramifications of each and every dialect in America even when there is no problem of American English not being the person's mother tongue.

American is flourishing, not like, for example, Ostrogothic, which is now defunct. One of Ostrogothic's last living speakers left us just 101 words. Some of which were *cadariou*=soldier, *goltz*=gold, *salt*=salt, *menus*=meat, *tzo*=thou, *sada*=hundred, *salt*=salt). Those few words were written down in the sixteenth century in the Crimea, centuries after the end of the Goths, by the Austrian ambassador to Constantinople, Ogier Ghislain de Busbecq. All the rest was lost forever. American's impact will probably last much longer than that of other empires because of our power (like that of the Goths and Visigoths and Ostrogoths of old) and mostly because of all the records of our language and use globally. In the long run, a thousand years or more after the end of the American empire, whenever that will be, far more words than that, one hopes, will eventually remain to mark the passing of our way of life. Many of the survivors will be dialect words, and they, with our slang, will surely show us to have been in our time a lively lot.

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