

DIALECT, AN INFORMAL RECORD OF HISTORY

REX WILSON

Augustana College, Rock Island

Most of us are apt to dismiss the language we speak with as little thought as we give the breath which propels it. Yet, in its own way, language is surprisingly substantial and tends to stay where it is put. These qualities make it potentially one of the most intimate and subtle sources of evidence for the cultural historian, although at the moment it is one of the least used.

Like any other detail of a civilization, be it village or field pattern, burial custom, barn architecture, or folklore themes, linguistic evidence can be mapped. One has only to travel from north to south in Illinois to notice a difference in speech. Current research which I shall mention later indicates that we are close to at least one boundary between two speech characteristics. In whatever direction we move we become aware that while we all speak what we call one language, we speak it differently in different places. The close and methodical investigation of these differences in the field and the recording and editing of the results is the work of the linguistic or dialect geographer.

A general survey of the dialects of this country is being carried out by a permanent organization under the direction of Hans Kurath of the University of Michigan. The *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*, sponsored by the American

Council of Learned Societies, has been in use since the summer of 1931.¹ In 1939, *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (6 vols.) was published.² Further regional studies followed, covering the whole Atlantic seaboard, but war and rising publishing costs have delayed the appearance of atlases containing Midland and Southern material. *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* has been written by Dr. Kurath making use of this material and data from the New England atlas.³ This book confines itself to matters of vocabulary and offers no difficulties for the interested layman. Further investigations are under way in the Great Lakes states and the upper Middle West,⁴ and a preliminary survey is being made in the Rocky Mountain states.

Atlas field workers use a questionnaire of more than 500 items which they put to native speakers in the area under investigation.⁵ All questions are asked orally and oral re-

¹ The genesis of the *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada* is dealt with in detail in *Handbook of the Linguistic Geography of New England*, Hans Kurath and others, Providence, 1939, pp. ix through xii.

² Hans Kurath and others, *Linguistic Atlas of New England*, six volumes and *Handbook*, Providence, 1939.

³ Hans Kurath, *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States*, Ann Arbor, 1949.

⁴ The regional directors are: Great Lakes, Prof. Albert H. Marckwardt, University of Michigan; Upper Midwest, Prof. Harold B. Allen, University of Minnesota.

⁵ This is an abridgment of the longer, about 800 items, questionnaire used in the New England "pilot project." The New England questionnaire is published in Hans Kurath's *Handbook*, pp. 150-158.

sponses are recorded in phonetic script.⁶

Both the *Handbook to the Linguistic Geography of New England* and *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* contain acknowledgments by Dr. Kurath of the contribution which settlement historians have made to the ground work of the *Linguistic Atlas*, but a historian leafing through the maps in *A Word Geography* will soon become aware that Dr. Kurath's thanks are not the only return the historian may expect. For the result in maps is a delicate tracing in some detail, not merely of the great recorded movements of our population and the more obvious interminglings of regional cultures, but also of the fine day-to-day relationships of work, play, and commerce. It is a sensitive and meaningful pattern.

Everywhere our settlers have gone they have taken their language, imposing it upon the regions where they have dominated, but borrowing distinctive and useful terms from neighbors with different regional origins. The results can be mapped just like any other feature of human geography, and the simplified lines or *isoglosses* which we throw around the areas where a term or pronunciation feature occurs carry significance far beyond their utility to the linguist.⁷

For instance, we can consider the distribution of terms for the dragon-

fly.⁸ This is a much-quoted example which shows a clear division of regional usage. *Darning needle* or *devil's darning needle* are the chief terms used in New England and its settlement areas, not only westward in New York State, northern Pennsylvania, and across the border to the northern strip of Ohio, but also in New England settlements of Nova Scotia. In all but the northern part of Pennsylvania the usual expression is *snake feeder*, while to the south, especially in the Virginia Piedmont, it is called *snake doctor*. Coastal areas of the South use *mosquito hawk*.

But one main feature of this distribution remains to be examined. The Midland term *snake feeder* is found virtually continuously in the valleys of the Alleghenies, where it competes with *snake doctor* in the Piedmont, and continues southwestward, sending a branch off to meet the coastal term *mosquito hawk* in North Carolina.

This shows how dialect geography refutes the common notion that in some mystic way the line run by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon is binding upon language and separates "Northern" from "Southern" speech. But, more important to the historian, we have here an informal documentation of the southwestward migration from Pennsylvania which preceded the better-known westward movement. More than this, we have a clear trace of the settlement of western North Carolina from the west, an offshoot of the migration from the north.

The isoglosses with which we might bound these terms resemble,

⁸ Kurath, *Word Geography*, p. 75 and fig. 141.

⁶ Atlas methodology is briefly described by E. Bagby Atwood in "Grease and Greasy—a Study of Geographical Variation" *The University of Texas Studies in English*, vol. 29, 1950, pp. 251—253; and Albert H. Marckwardt, "Folk Speech in Indiana and Adjacent States," *Indiana History Bulletin*, Vol. 17, No. 2, February, 1940, pp. 124—127. The standard detailed description in Chap. II of Kurath's *Handbook*.

⁷ Atwood, "Grease and Greasy," pp. 252, 253, describes cartographical representation of linguistic atlas data with accuracy and caution.

but do not coincide precisely with, any number which might be drawn on the basis of *Atlas* evidence. Their projection across the country remains parallel to what we know of population movements. As the work of the *Atlas* is incomplete, we must examine this projection in occasional articles by field workers and other linguists using available field records. One illuminating example is Bagby Atwood's study on the pronunciation of *grease* and *greasy* which traces a line, based on the collections in the Eastern states, across Pennsylvania and New Jersey from Long Island to the border counties of Ohio.⁹ The line is less clear cut than a pair of isoglosses bounding a band of overlapping usage. To the north virtually all informants say [gris] and to the south [griz]. In broad terms the band moves across most of northern New Jersey and turns to follow the Delaware River south. As it moves westward again from the mouth of the Delaware it places most of the lower Susquehanna in the [gris] area and then moves northwestward across the headwaters of the Allegheny to turn southward in Ohio just where the evidence available in field records ends.

Dr. Atwood quotes Prof. A. H. Marekwardt, director of the Great Lakes atlas, who finds that preliminary surveys place the northern limit of [grizi] in central Ohio, swinging northward in the west to take in most of Indiana, then turning southward again through central Illinois toward St. Louis.¹⁰ Prof. Marekwardt's map and my observa-

tions indicate that the line passes south of Springfield on its way to the vicinity of St. Louis. Concerning usage across the Mississippi we have no reliable recent evidence, but a native of Hordville, Nebraska, gave [grizi]. In view of what we know of population history in the west this is not unexpected.

So far I have merely indicated parallels in linguistic geography to what records might lead us to expect. No doubt corroborative evidence is useful, but dialect geography can offer more. It would be foolish to suggest that it can ever give the settlement historian evidence as solid as land grant records which refer to the origins of settlers, backed up by baptismal certificates of generations and an array of family gravestones, but safe inferences can be drawn from dialect clues in the absence of such records or where it is suspected that a recorded place of origin was actually only where settlers stopped for a few years or a generation before moving on.

In the case of a community with squatter origins, linguistic facts at times may be the only hope of the historian. In speaking of the West I am merely speculating, but in the region where I have done field work, Nova Scotia, I have been encouraged by Dr. J. B. Brebner, of Columbia University, to cover some of the more remote coastal regions in the hope of throwing light on historical problems. This is particularly remarkable in view of the fact that Nova Scotia is a province with excellent archives completely covering a long period of formal land settlement. The records are so good that when I mentioned to Dr. D. C. Harvey, the

⁹ Atwood.

¹⁰ Atwood, p. 256; and Marekwardt, pp. 127-130, and fig. 4.

Provincial Archivist, that one fishing village seemed to be completely without records and firm traditions of its origin, he insisted that the county was well covered by land grant records and made a note to look up some of the surnames I gave him. He was right, of course, about the settlement records, but the ancestors of this village never had grants—they simply drifted in, some of them, local romancers suggest, probably literally, from shipwrecks or by jumping ship. Some purposefully, perhaps, forgot their origins for fear of seeing service again in His Majesty's ships. At any rate, they speak a dialect notorious for its distinctiveness in a town only six miles away, and a recent letter from Dr. Harvey concedes that that is possibly the best clue we have to their origins.

Linguistic evidence, of course, has its limitations and must be used with care. While it is surprisingly durable as a record of history it is plastic, too. We have seen how *snake feeder*, representing Midland penetration of the Alleghenies, competes with the Piedmont term, *snake doctor*, reflecting the two sources of migration to that area. We cannot always rely on so clear a record. Matters of prestige and the manner of settlement may obscure it. In one county in Nova Scotia the earliest settlers were from eastern New England. Their descendants today, if we may judge arbitrarily by surnames, are not a majority of the population, yet since the middle of the eighteenth century no generation has brought to the county more settlers than could be readily assimilated linguistically. It is therefore not sur-

prising to find that New England vocabulary and speech characteristics predominate among the native born. But significant terms belonging to Scottish or Southern or Midland speech occur occasionally to remind us of their admixture and sometimes to suggest the role of those groups in the community.

This is obviously not the sort of evidence from which the statistician can gain comfort, and the settlement historian must approach it with care, but its very plasticity, its suggestiveness, makes it invaluable to the cultural scholar. For every word has its own history, and behind each word is a thing, action, institution, or custom.

The classic example is G. G. Kloeke's study of the vowels in the Dutch words for *mouse* and *house*.¹¹ In simplified terms this involved a situation where all dialects, whatever their peculiar pronunciation of the vowels of these words, should have pronounced them both alike. Germanic phonology indicated this as virtually inescapable. Yet Kloeke's survey showed that the vowel pronunciation of the area around the great cities of the Netherlands extended further for *house* than it did for *mouse*, leaving a significant area where the words did not rhyme. As *house* is a clearly technical word and a recognizable member of the official vocabulary, whereas *mouse* is a homely word, something approaching the boundary of the cultural influence of the coastal cities in the Moddle Ages can be mapped by the linguist.¹²

¹¹ Leonard Bloomfield, *Language*, New York, 1933, pp. 328-331, and fig. 6.

¹² Bloomfield sheds additional light on placing the date of the cultural influence.

A livelier picture of cultural diffusion is provided by the discussion of the word *shivaree* by Alva L. Davis and Raven I. McDavid, Jr., a noisy and prankish observance which sometimes follows weddings.¹³ This word and terms equivalent to it present a map strikingly at variance with the general direction of the isoglosses which I have mentioned so far. The evidence is not all in yet, but what we know suggests an influence of New Orleans and Quebec French cultures which is quite unexpected in its geographical extent. The term seems widely shared throughout the Mississippi and St. Lawrence River basins, while the coastal states and Ohio use a variety of terms; the most widespread is *serenade* in most of New England and the South, *skimmilton* or *skimmerton* in the Hudson Valley, *horning* in upper New York State, and *belling* in southwestern Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio.

Dialect geography is not concerned merely with the quaint and curious. For valid linguistic reasons it has concentrated on the homely, but even everyday language can show such additions to our culture as trade and commerce have brought. We are reminded by reference to those things which do not concern the home that dialect geography is not merely the record of settlement and migrant cultures but of all sorts of subsequent change.

One of the most distinctive and surprising trade terms in the country is the Boston term *tonic* for the numerous flavors of soda water.¹⁴

Its spread clearly distinguishes the Boston trade area for this commodity and covers Cape Cod, Nantucket, the Merrimac Valley, and most of the coast of Maine, but it is not in general use in Rhode Island and Connecticut. However, *tonic* seems to be going out of current usage in the great inland resort area, presumably because its great and seasonal group of customers largely find the term foreign.

A similar case is the Philadelphia term *baby coach* for *baby carriage*, which is also used in Delaware, southern New Jersey, and southern Pennsylvania as far west as the Alleghenies.¹⁵

The Pennsylvania term *coal oil* has a similar relationship to the rival *kerosene* of the New England settlement area, although settlement has helped to spread these two and other terms for the same product.¹⁶ This places some areas under divided usage although they share the same trade sources. For example, I have noticed both along the north shore of Lake Ontario.

Once again we are reminded of the complexity of the dialect record and of the close interrelation between linguist and historian. I have attempted to emphasize the significance to the historian of the work of the *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*. I would like to urge historians to lend the *Atlas* their support whenever and wherever it seeks funds for its surveys.¹⁷ For there is a peculiar urgency to this work. The record is perishable;

¹³ Alva L. Davis and Raven I. McDavid, Jr., "Shivaree": An Example of Cultural Diffusion," *American Speech*, December, 1949, pp. 249-255.
¹⁴ Kurath, *Word Geography*, pp. 20, 21.

¹⁵ Kurath, *Word Geography*, p. 77.

¹⁶ Kurath, *Word Geography*, p. 60, fig. 84.

¹⁷ This echoes the remarks of Marckwardt eleven years ago in "Folk Speech in Indiana," and it is unfortunately not out of date.

the earliest record of our speech can be reliably obtained only from our oldest living informants. Daily our horizon becomes more limited.

Not only the historian but every student of man is concerned in some way with the prosperity of this apparently linguistic study. The interests of the sociologist, the anthro-

pologist, and the folklorist are closely bound up with the study of dialects. Although there has not been time to explore their particular relationships here, I hope I have implied a fruitful source of material for them.¹⁸

¹⁸ Raven I. McDavid, Jr., "Dialect Geography and Social Science Problems," *Social Forces*, Vol. 25 (December, 1946-47), pp. 168-72.