Dialect Study and English Education

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One who has been involved in a major research project, like the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada, must necessarily be more concerned with the project for its own sake than with any implications, however so practical. For one thing, the design and execution of any research project must be such that it achieves what it sets out to do, regardless of any practical aims, however laudable; too much immediate preoccupation with practical aims is likely to distort the investigation. Besides, as our brethren in atomic physics have dramatically demonstrated in the past generation, one never knows what is practical and what is not; the most significant practical results are achieved by getting a rigorously designed investigation pushed through to its conclusions, so that the implications can be followed up by others. Moreover, it has been pointed out—for linguistics—that perhaps five levels of work and five different types of personality are needed in the process of getting the findings of the discipline into the hands of intelligent laymen and of the students in our schools.

1. First, we need the general linguistic theorist, who works speculatively on a high level, concerned with the relationships of linguistics to other disciplines and of language to other manifestations of human behavior. To mention only a few—and without any disparagement of those who are not here mentioned—one can think of Sapir and Jespersen and Bloomfield, or Pike and Chomsky, or Trager and Halliday and Lamb.

2. The next level of operation involves the description of particular languages, or dialects, or pairs of languages and dialects; here the general theoretical framework may or may not be mentioned. It does not appear in Fries’s two works, American English Grammar¹ and The Structure of English,² though what Fries says is related to the previous work of Jespersen. On the other hand, Hill’s Introduction to Linguistic Structures³ is confessedly based on the Trager-Smith Outline of English Structure⁴—so much so that irreverent observers subtitle it Archbishop Hill’s Exegesis of the Gospel According to St. George; or a Hill of a Way to Tragerize English. And no observer is so obtuse as to miss

¹Sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1940).
the voice of the Master of the Lower Charles in the work of his beloved disciple Robert Lees, A Grammar of Nominalizations in English.  

3. The third level is that of popularization, whether for a lay audience or for classroom use. Here the responsibility of the writer is to take the knowledge of the language analyst, with an understanding of the underlying theoretical position, and order it in such a way as to achieve fuller and more immediate comprehension. Here the writer must remember not to underestimate the intelligence of the audience, but not to overestimate their information; he must remember that the order that is good at an advanced level, or as a scientific description, may not necessarily work in a public description or for the elementary student. And with the number of students in the millions, he may discover that many different kinds of pedagogical interpretations are needed to fit all the possible audiences.

At this level of performance, one thinks particularly of the work of Paul Roberts, at various stations along his pilgrim’s progress, or of the reading series edited by Rosemary Wilson, by Don Rasmussen and Lynn Coldberg, and by Ralph Robinett and his Miami associates. With Roberts the underlying theoretical position and the derivative analysis are stated fairly overtly; with the reading series—designed for a much younger audience—they never appear in the classroom materials, but may be discussed in the teachers’ manuals.

Here a caution is necessary. In my Satanic peregrinations up and down the United States, even at conventions such as this, I am often asked to talk about “the linguistic method” in the English classroom. Let me be emphatic here that there is no linguistic method of teaching; there are various pedagogical methods—most of them very old—which may utilize the data which linguists have assembled and ordered. It does linguistics no service that various publishers, which should be nameless, emphasize the “linguistic method” of their books—even if the only linguistic content is a brief supplement in Tragerian or Friesian terms, tacked on to a textbook which employs an entirely different grammatical analysis; it only confuses the teacher and disgusts the serious linguist.

4. The next level consists of the training of teachers in the new content and in methods of adapting it to the classroom situation. At this level we are still very weak; we are not turning out enough teachers, or trainers of teachers, or even those who can train the trainers of teachers. For this gap, paradoxically, the rapid expansion of linguistics itself is in part responsible. Until World War II there were few departments of linguistics, and those mostly on paper; a would-be linguist worked in one of the orthodox academic departments—English, Germanics, Romance, classics, anthropology—and took necessary courses outside, according to his special interests. Now, however, departments of linguistics are numerous; their students seldom develop an acquaintance with the literary and cultural offerings that the older departments provide. Graduates from such departments have such a variety of opportunities—government employment, machine translation, English teaching overseas—that even if English

is their chief language, they are less and less likely to be candidates for posts in English departments; and the belles-lettres bias of most English departments (not excluding my own) makes it difficult to develop new graduate programs in the English language to make up for the deficiency. The shortage of people at the levels between the investigator of particular languages and the classroom teacher is such that the language committee of the recent conference at Lincoln took particular note and urged that the training of people for this level be given the highest priority.

5. The final level, and the one where the knowledge pays off, is that of the classroom. Although the general classroom teacher has better opportunities than a generation ago to become informed, there is still too little information available for his needs, and the supply of effective linguists in teacher training programs has barely kept pace with the growing demand for teachers.

If this is a true picture of general linguistics in relation to the needs of American education, the picture is even less satisfying where dialectology is concerned. Again, there is an adequate body of theoretical scholars. However, those who have done—or should be doing—serious investigations of the dialects of American English are relatively few, and until very recently their numbers have not increased appreciably. This slow growth can be explained partly by the lack of funds for investigation and editing, partly by the peculiar qualifications needed to be a good investigator in the field—not only sound general training in linguistics and a facility for rapid phonetic transcription in the field, but an ability to get along with all kinds of informants, to elicit natural responses, and to endure living conditions not always up to the standards of Duncan Hines. The lack of funds for publication of the major collections has meant that a relatively few students have been able to work from primary sources. Consequently, there are few good pedagogically oriented statements suitable for the elementary or high school teacher. Such interpretative works as Kurath's *Word Geography*, Kurath's and my *Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States*, Atwood's *Survey of Verb Forms in the Eastern United States* and *The Regional Vocabulary of Texas* are relatively unknown to the classroom teacher; in fact, they have not even been used by the two most widely advertised programs for facing the dialect differences in northern urban school systems and southern Negro colleges. Teacher training programs have little to say about the cause and nature of dialect differences, and particularly of those that exist in the United States; and classroom teachers—even in cosmopolitan communities—are still unwilling to recognize that some other variety of English may be not only as legitimate but as excellent as their own. Except for the Bloomington conference on social dialects, whose proceedings were published last year by the NCTE, teachers are largely dependent on the summary in Chapter 9 of

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Nelson Francis, *The Structure of American English*,\(^\text{11}\) written nearly a decade ago.

It would perhaps not seem necessary to mention the gaps in our knowledge if we were living in a time of Coolidge complacency, when it was assumed that we would always have and always need a large number of unskilled laborers, when even illiteracy was no necessary bar to successful living at tolerable wages, when high schools enrolled a small proportion of the elementary school population, so that the few who entered high school from uneducated families could be assimilated to the mores of the middle class, including their patterns of speech. But with the raising of the age of compulsory school attendance, the efflorescence of the dogma of social promotion, and the inundation of the schools by the underprivileged—including, in northern cities, the unhappy fruits of the southern pattern of separate and unequal educational facilities—the existence of sharply divergent dialects in the same school system and even in the same classroom has become a commonplace, and as a part of our efforts to compensate for economic and social disadvantages the schools have become concerned over the social liability of substandard linguistic forms. This has always been a part of the function of the schools—teaching a command of an idiom, a variety of language, other than what one learns naturally, whether this is a completely different language (as when Latin was the medium of learning during the Middle Ages) or a prestigious variety of the vernacular, as in every Western country from the late Middle Ages to the present. The problem has always been to define the variety of the language to be taught in the schools, to develop materials for teaching that variety effectively, and to provide a set of sanctions by which the students would learn the situations in which varieties of the language might and should be used.

It is therefore apparent that the effective use of dialect evidence in the American classroom demands work on nearly every level. But it is likewise apparent that we can still make a number of statements about the ways in which these materials can be used. And in comparison with the state of affairs a generation ago, we are very well off.

First, we have collected, for the Linguistic Atlas, systematic evidence—in field interviews, by trained investigators, with identifiable informants—from a large part of the United States, including the entire area of original settlement, the Great Lakes Basin and Ohio Valley, the Upper Midwest, California, Nevada, and Colorado. Outside these regions we have a number of other bodies of data—local, incomplete, or conducted by less skilled persons—such as student interviews covering all of Louisiana, a vocabulary study of Texas and environs, and investigations of the bilingual situation in San Antonio and of class differences in the speech of Memphis Negroes.

Second, we have a number of intensive local studies, some of them based on the Linguistic Atlas materials, others independent. These include such major communities as New York, San Francisco, Cincinnati, Louisville, Akron, the Port Arthur-Orange-Beaumont complex in Texas, and such minor centers as

Terre Haute, Indiana. Others are under way or projected. In several communities we have follow-up investigations, to see what changes have taken place since the first Linguistic Atlas records were made in the early 1930's. The most significant new investigations are perhaps those in New England, directed by Audrey Duckert. All of these new investigations take more account than did the earlier Atlas field work of the impact of new in-migrants and minority groups; particularly important will be a proposed dissertation on the differences between Negro and white speech in some thirty southern communities where there are paired informants of comparable economic, educational, and social status.

Third, we are beginning to have a number of studies of reactions to dialect differences, and to the directions of dialect differences, and to the directions of dialect shift in an individual under various types of speech situations. Here I would include the dissertation of William Labov, of Columbia University, whose findings have been presented to many gatherings of linguists and anthropologists but not yet made accessible to the general public. Almost as interesting, though with a less sophisticated design, is the dissertation of Rufus Baehr, at Chicago. An illuminating study of the folklore of racial speech characteristics is likely to come out of the Chicago social dialects project.

Fourth, the publications dealing with dialect differences and their implications are increasing. Although the Linguistic Atlas of New England is out of print, a reprint is envisaged about 1968, in connection with the appearance of the first volume of the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States. The other regional atlases—North-Central, Upper Midwest, and California-Nevada being the ones where field work is complete or at least fairly well along—are also progressing toward publication. Labov's dissertation will appear in print this spring; it should soon be followed by Lee Pederson's study of dialect differences within the Chicago metropolitan area. Roger Shuy is developing a new monograph of dialect differences, designed for high school use and incorporating the latest available data. And a manual for teachers, dealing with the problems of social dialects, is in prospect—whenever the proposal clears the glacial processes of the U. S. Office of Education.

Fifth, we are finally beginning to develop a new generation of dialect scholars who are capable of initiating and directing new research projects, of training teachers, and developing students who in their turn will be able to train teachers.

Finally, through the combined resources of the Center for Applied Linguistics and the NCTE, we have a clearing house for information on both research projects and teaching programs dealing with dialect differences in American English.

Let us now see what some of the implications our new knowledge of dialect differences may have for teaching programs.

First of all, dialect differences, whether regional or social, reflect complex patterns of population origins, routes of migrations and communication, economic organization, educational systems, social structure, and historical developments. In a world where we hope that ethnocentrism is on the decline, it might be
well to start our understanding of cultural differences with other Americans. Since language is probably the most habitual form of human behavior, we can call attention to the diversity of speech patterns existing within our own nation as one more indication of our cultural vitality. Investigations of this kind, guided by the suggestions in the Linguistic Atlas handbooks and in derivative studies, can be conducted at a very early age, in almost any situation. This is a kind of research that requires little equipment: it may be just as fruitful in stimulating controlled curiosity as the more elaborate experiments using scientific hardware; its payoff will be more immediate, since even fairly young students can observe that some people talk differently than others. I remember that one of my boys at the ripe age of four asked quite seriously, “Daddy, why is it that you say [ən] when Mamma says [aˈn]?" A skillful teacher can turn the sometimes embarrassingly different speech of a newcomer into a class asset. Furthermore, our evidence from the dialect investigations can enable us to point out the basic difference of the American situation from that of most of the nations of Western Europe: although upper class London English, Parisian French, Moscow Russian, Castilian Spanish, Florentine Italian, and a derivative upper class South German have an overwhelming cultural prestige as opposed to all other regional varieties in their respective countries, in the United States—as we have plenty of evidence—the most eloquent expression of the national conscience can be presented in the accents of the Hudson Valley, central Illinois, Boston, southwest Texas, or Mississippi.

The dialectologist can also show the classroom teacher that not only do we have variety, but we have constant change. It is apparent that cultivated southern speech is already somewhat different from what it was three decades ago: the [ai] and [au] diphthongs are less common than they used to be in Virginian and Charlestonian night and out. A larger proportion of educated southerners use and accept the monophthongal pronunciation of [ai], not only in ride and die, where it has always been widespread, but in what was our childhood shibboleth, nice white rice. On the other hand, the homonymy of tired and tarred is still as much of a social stigma as ever.

The dialectologist can also point out that change in dialect patterns results from human interactions. Radio and television—despite their great public exposure—have little effect, because the audience is passive; the continuous exposure to the television among the children of the urban disadvantaged has had no demonstrable influence on their language facility, their pronunciation, or even on their grammar. This evidence would suggest that any school program attempting to alter the speech patterns of children in the direction of a variety of standard English should concentrate on those features of the language that are most readily correlated with social status and try to make the standard forms habitual at least in the formal situation.

It is apparent that vocabulary changes in response to social experience; the rural Illinois child will learn as a matter of course the differences between pigs, shotts, hogs, sows, gilts, boars, barrows, stags, and rigs; the urban child will as easily learn the differences in kinds of apartment buildings. It was a shock to me to hear my wife apply the name boulevard to the grass strip
between the sidewalk and the street; I had no native name for it; since then I have heard it called parking, tree lawn, devil strip, and tree belt. New words, for new things or old, are easily picked up.

Grammatical differences most often reflect education. There are a few regional differences in the grammar of standard English—done [dow] as the past tense of dive is a good example—but not too many of these, and most of them appear in the informal and oral rather than in the formal and written uses of language. In the past, the schools have been rather successful in imparting the standard grammatical practices to those who did not have them in their home dialect, probably because the problem affected only a minority in most classrooms. Today, however, the grammatical practices of certain minority groups will identify them, in certain situations, not only in speech but in writing. To be specific, in Chicago it is possible to identify the race of a high school graduate at least nine times out of ten by the grammatical forms in a theme. This would suggest that the inculcating of standard grammatical forms must henceforth be accomplished by some other means than those employed in the middle class oriented textbooks which still prevail in our schools—textbooks which emphasize the marking and "correcting" of discrete "errors" rather than the habitual production of standard forms. This perhaps also suggests an encouragement of oral participation from the beginning of the school experience, with a more imaginative use of seatwork and outside written assignments.

Pronunciation is the most habitual part of language, changing rarely after age ten and then only in response to intensive interactions. Here the dialectologist can be of most service to the classroom teacher—in sorting out the features that are most associated with nonstandard speech everywhere, and ignoring those which have some standing in some varieties of cultivated English. After all, the task of the English teacher, at whatever level, is difficult enough when he attempts to modify a limited number of habitual language practices.

The places in the curriculum where a knowledge of dialects might be valuable to the teacher will depend on the kinds of classroom situation. But assuming that the monolithic Caucasoïd village society no longer exists, if it ever did, we can see several specific applications of this knowledge. Let us begin with regional dialect differences, assuming the students have some variety of standard English in their homes.

First of all, as my pronunciation of on indicates, there are different sets of phonemic-graphemic associations. In the Pittsburgh area, cot and caught are homonyms; in many urban areas speakers do not consistently distinguish the wails from a baby's crib from the whales in the sea; in some sections they do not distinguish the airs of a conceited woman from the ears she has had pierced. The ordering of both reading and spelling materials might take these differences into account; I have at least advised this on the two or three occasions when publishers have picked my brains.

In speech and composition, there is a need to sort out the regional difference from the social—and also a need to know the forms that will not give difficulty. None of my classmates in South Carolina needed to be discouraged from saying hadn't ought or sick to the stomach, though some of them adopted
these forms after finding them mentioned in their textbook exercises. I have
since learned that both are a part of standard Northern, though the former
would not appear in formal written English. It is also likely—though we don’t
yet have the evidence—that regional differences in stress patterns make certain
syntactic structures in Kentucky themes ambiguous to upstate New Yorkers.

In literature, we need to realize that an author’s style is not generated by a
computer, but is usually derivative from the kinds of English he hears about
him. This one will concede about special kinds of dialects, either ethnic varieties
like that in the Uncle Remus stories or the pseudo-sophistication of Holden
Caulfield. But it operates on a higher level as well; Mississippi English influences
Faulkner not only in phonetic spellings and folk grammar of his uneducated
characters, or in words or regional provenance or with clear regional meanings;
it is also apparent in the rhythm of the narration.

It is in the matter of social dialects, however, that there is properly the
greatest interest at the time. It is unfortunately directed almost intensively at
the speech of the disadvantaged Negroes in our northern slums—I say “unfor-
tunately” not because their problems are not acute, or their numbers large, but
because this focus is likely to become a racist one, with certain features singled
out and emphasized as features of “Negro speech” although the specific details
may be found clustering in the same way in many varieties of white Anglo-
Saxon Protestant Gentile English, and though the same kinds of problems are
associated with every situation where children learn in the home some kind of
language other than standard English.

One part of the language problem of these groups—fluency and facility—is
outside the province of dialectology as such, except insofar as an unreasonable
emphasis on “correctness” and an unrealistic standard of the target dialect may
simply inhibit the students. Related to this is what might be called the lower
class mumble, especially but not exclusively associated with Negroes and south-
ern poor whites. Essentially a protective device, to prevent their remarks from
being used against them by the representatives of the dominant culture, it can
probably be combated most effectively by developing some confidence in one’s
dignity as a human being, with a chance to participate more fully in our
society. Here the dialectologist has no special expertise beyond that of any
sensitive and dedicated teacher.

The grammatical problems, we have noted, are the crucial ones in our
society for setting off uneducated speech and writing from educated. Here the
systematic features are particularly important—those which recur again and
again. Among these we have the regular plural inflections of nouns, the third
singular present indicative of verbs—makes, gives, pushes—the regular past tense
and past participles, the -ing ending of the present participle, the proper number
and person forms of the verb to be. In syntax we have proper use of auxiliaries
—he with adjectives and participles, have with the past participle. Although the
details of deviation from the standard pattern vary from one minority group to
another, many of them are shared by such diverse groups as uneducated Negroes,
Appalachian whites and Louisiana Cajans, to mention only a few of the dis-
advantaged; others by various urban ethnic groups of European origin.
It is with pronunciation that one finds sharp differences between the problems of particular groups. The Spanish-American seems to be unique in supplying an extra vowel before English words beginning in the consonant clusters [sp, st, sk]; the Japanese and Chinese in confusing [r] and [l]; the French in ignoring phonemic stress. All speakers of other languages have difficulties in acquiring the command of the large number of vowel and diphthong distinctions that English employs; anyone who speaks a native-based variety of English, whether Gullah or Greenpoint, is used to making far more distinctions than appear in Spanish, Italian or Japanese. But nonstandard speakers of English share with speakers of other languages incomplete control of the significant differences between [t], [θ], and [ʃ] and between [d], [ð], and [v], and many of them share the foreign language speaker's difficulty with the complicated final consonant clusters with which English abounds. Other systematic features are shared by certain groups of speakers of nonstandard English, as the omission of unstressed initial syllables, giving jessor for professor and porter for reporter, or a heavy stress on final syllables where standard English has weak stress, as in presi'dent, elem'ent. Others may be discovered as we gather more evidence in the field, particularly as we learn more about the varieties of Negro speech. But if we think in terms of a positive approach to the command of standard English patterns, rather than in terms of detecting and correcting as discrete items each deviation from the patterns, we already have enough evidence on which to base a rich and effective program.

You will note that I have omitted discrete items in grammar and pronunciation, such as holp [hop] as the past tense or participle of help, or the pronunciation of deaf as [dif]. These will have to be learned more or less as items, for whelp and yelp seem to be regular in even nonstandard American English, and leaf everywhere has the [i] vowel. But it is the pattern that makes the major difference between standard and nonstandard English.

The problem arises as to what the target dialect should be. For this I would suggest that the program should present consistently a variety of standard English current in the particular community, but that the students should not be forced to give up speech forms that are standard in wide areas, however much they might differ from local norms; if they wish to shift of themselves in these matters, they can do so—a great deal of language modification goes on informally and even unconsciously, so that after a decade in the Inland North I was told by my sister in Gaffney, South Carolina, that I speak just like a Yankee. One might even think of the possibility of standard Alabama as the target dialect in the public schools of Chicago or Detroit, where it would be at least a more nearly realizable target for the majority of public school students. But in any event, there are so many socially significant differences that one can afford to omit such frills as the distinction between wails and whales.

A second problem concerns the use to be made of the school dialect. I am personally in favor of recognizing functional bidialectalism, since the ability to use naturally the grammar of the mountaineer and the mill hand has been a pronounced social asset in my field work. But it is only rarely that one who comes by standard English naturally will find it to his advantage to learn a non-
standard dialect. One should emphasize, again, the positive advantages of the standard variety but should not worry if there is code switching in informal situations where the home dialect is more comfortable. I should certainly resent the notion that a middle western variety of English should be taught in programs designed for southern Negroes. The encouragement of New England pronunciations in the schools set up during Reconstruction has created the impression among intelligent and not unsympathetic southern whites that education made the Negro "uppity." It would be tragic to reduce the chances of achieving integration in the South by bringing the Negro into the southern classroom with a school dialect remarkably different from that of his white classmates. As it is, the same range of differences in pronunciation and in grammar may be found among both southern Negroes and southern whites; a teaching program emphasizing a variety of standard English in harmony with the patterns of the local community will be easier to operate and will accomplish more in the long run.

I have heard observers comment that it is impossible to get people to accept a multivalent standard for American English. This is a pessimism I will not accept; and being without an accent myself, I see no reason why I or my children should be bludgeoned into what may be for us an unnatural pattern of speech—nor why any other person, anywhere, should be so bludgeoned if he has achieved command of some variety that is standard, whether it is Charleston or Keokuk. In fact, along with any program in language teaching to those who do not speak and write standard English should go a program for emphasizing that all dialects are natural and legitimate, that standard American English may vary from place to place, and that no difference—standard or nonstandard—is due to mental or moral inferiority, but only to differences in experience.