Looking at Language

All-American Dialects

by Richard Lederer, Ph.D.

I have tongue and will travel, so I run around the country speaking to groups of teachers, students, librarians, women’s clubbers, guild professionals, and corporate clients. These good people go to all the trouble of putting together meetings and conferences, and I walk in, share my thoughts about language in their lives, and imbibe their collective energy and synergy. I will go anywhere to spread the word about words, and in going anywhere from California to the New York Island, from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters, I hear America singing. We are teeming nations within a nation, a nation that is like a world. We talk in melodies of infinite variety; we dance to their sundry measures and lyrics.

Midway through John Steinbeck’s epic novel The Grapes of Wrath young Ivy observes, “Ever’body says words different. Arkansas folks says ‘em different, and Oklahomy folks says ’em different. And we seen a lady from Massachusetts, an’ she said ’em differentest of all. Couldn’t hardly make out what she was sayin’.”

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The creation of that sandwich took place in the Italian pushcart section of the city, known as Hog Island. Some linguists contend that it was but a short leap from Hog Island to hoagie, while others claim that the label hoagie arose because only a hog had the appetite or the technique to eat one properly.

As a young adult I moved to northern New England (NHampsha, to be specific), where the same sandwich designed to be a meal in itself is called a grinder—because you need a good set of grinders to chew them. But my travels around the United States have revealed that the hoagie or grinder is called at least a dozen other names—a bomber, Garibaldi (after the Italian liberator), hero, Italian sandwich, rocket, sub, submarine (which is what they call it in Garibaldi, after the Italian liberator), hero, Italian sandwich, rocket, sub, submarine (which is what they call it in New York Island, from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters, I hear America singing. We are teeming nations within a nation, a nation that is like a world. We talk in melodies of infinite variety; we dance to their sundry measures and lyrics.

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The biblical book of Judges (12:4-6) tells us how one
group of speakers used the word shibboleth, Hebrew for
"stream," as a military password. The Gileadites had defeated
the Ephraimites in battle and were holding some narrow places
on the Jordan River that the fleeing Ephraimites had to cross
to get home. In those days it was hard to tell one kind of sol-
dier from another because soldiers didn’t wear uniforms.

The Gileadites knew that the Ephraimites spoke a slightly
different dialect of Hebrew and could be recognized by their
inability to pronounce an initial sh sound. Thus, each time a
soldier wanted to cross the river, “the men of Gilead said unto
him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay, then they said
unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he
could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him and
slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time
forty and two thousand."

During World War II, some American officers adapted
the strategy of the Old Testament Gileadites. Knowing that
many Japanese have difficulty pronouncing the letter l, these
officers instructed their sentries to use only passwords that had
l’s in them, such as lallapalooza. The closest the Japanese got
to the sentries was rarraparooza.

These days English speakers don’t get slaughtered for pro-
ouncing their words differently from other English speakers,
but the way those sounds can be labeled “funny” or “quaint” or “out of touch.” In George Bernard Shaw’s play
Pygmalion, Professor Henry Higgins rails at Liza Doolittle and
her cockney accent: “A woman who utters such depressing and
disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere—no right to
die. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and
the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language
is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and the Bible; and
don’t sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon!”

Most of us are aware that large numbers of people in the
United States speak very differently than we do. Most of us
tend to feel that the way “we” talk is right, and the way “they”
talk is funny. “They,” of course, refers to anyone who differs
from “us.”

If you ask most adults what a dialect is, they will tell you
it is what somebody else in another region passes off as
English. These regions tend to be exotic places like Mississippi
or Texas—or Brooklyn, where oil is a rank of nobility and earl
is a black, sticky substance.

It is reported that many southerners reacted to the elec-
tions of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton by saying, “Well, at
last we have a president who talks without an accent.”
Actually, southerners, like everyone else, do speak with an
accent, as witness these tongue-in-cheek entries in our Dictionary of Southernisms:

- ah: organ for seeing
- are: sixty minutes
- arr: ferrous metal
- ass: frozen water
- ast: questioned
- bane: small, kidney-shaped vegetable
- bar: seek and receive a loan; grizzly
- bold: heated in water
- card: one who lacks courage
- farst: a lot of trees
- fur: distance
- har: to employ
- hep: to assist
- hire yew: a greeting
- paw tree: verse
- rat: opposite of left
- reckonize: to see
- tared: exhausted
- t’mar: day following t’day
- thang: item
- thank: to cogitate

Any glossary of Southernspeak would be incomplete with-
out “yawl: a bunch of you’s.” When I visited Alexandria,
Louisiana, a local pastor offered me proof that y’all has bibli-
cal origins, especially in the letters of the apostle Paul: “We
give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you
in our prayers” (First Epistle to the Thessalonians, 1:2) and
“One, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all” (First
Epistle to the Romans, 1:8). “Obviously,” the good reverend
told me, “Saint Paul was a Southerner.” Then he added,
“Thank you, Yankee visitor, for appreciating our beloved
Southernspeak. We couldn’t talk without it!”

An anonymous poem that I came upon in Louisville,
Kentucky, clarifies the plural use of the one-syllable pronoun
y’all:

Y’all gather ’round from far and near,
Both city folk and rural,
And listen while I tell you this:
The pronoun y’all is plural.

If I should utter, “Y’all come down,
Or we-all shall be lonely,”
I mean at least a couple folks,
And not one person only.

If I should say to Hiram Jones,
“I think that y’all are lazy,”
Or “Will y’all let me use y’all’s knife?”
He’d think that I was crazy.

Don’t think I mean to criticize
Or that I’m full of gall,
But when we speak of one alone,
We all say “you,” not “y’all.”

If the truth about dialects be told, we all have accents.
Many New Englanders drop the r in cart and farm and say
cahl and fahm. Thus, the midwesterner’s “park the car in
Harvard Yard” becomes the New Englander’s “pahk the cah
in Hahvahd Yahd.” But those r’s aren’t lost. A number of
upper northeasterners, including the famous Kennedy family of Massachusetts, add r’s to words, such as *idear* and *Caber* when those words come before a vowel or at the end of a sentence.

When an amnesia victim appeared at a truck stop in Missouri in the fall of 1987, authorities tried in vain to help her discover her identity. Even after three months, police “ran into a brick wall,” according to the *Columbia Daily Tribune*. Then, linguist Donald Lance of the University of Missouri-Columbia was called in to analyze her speech. After only a few sentences, Lance recognized the woman’s West Pennsylvania dialect, and, within one month, police in Pittsburgh located the woman’s family.

Among the clues used to pinpoint the woman’s origin was the West-Pennsylvanian use of *greezy*, instead of *greasy*, and *teeter-totter*, rather than *seesaw*. Dialectologists know that people who pronounce the word as *greezy* usually live south of a line that wiggles across the northern parts of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.

Linguist Roger Shuy writes about the reactions of Illinois residents in a 1962 survey of regional pronunciations, including the soundings of *greasy*: “The northern Illinois informants felt the southern pronunciation was crude and ugly; it made them think of a very messy, dirty, sticky, smelly frying pan. To the southern and midland speakers, however, the northern pronunciation connoted a messy, dirty, sticky, smelly skillet.”

Using the tools of his trade, Shuy was able to accurately profile Ted Kaczynski, the elusive Unabomber who terrorized the nation through the 1990s. Culling linguistic evidence from Kaczynski’s “Manifesto,” published in the *New York Times*, and the notes and letters accompanying the bombs, Shuy deduced the Unabomber’s geographical origin, religious background, age, and education level.

Among the clues were the Unabomber’s use of *sierras* to mean “mountains,” an indication that the writer had spent some time living in northern California. In his “Manifesto” Kaczynski used expressions common to a person who was a young adult in the 1960s—*Holy Robots*, *working stiff*, and *playing footsy*. His employment of sociological terms, such as *other directed*, and his many references to individual drives suggested an acquaintance with the sociology in vogue during the sixties, particularly that of David Reisman. The complexity of Kaczynski’s sentence structure, including the subjunctive mood, and the learnedness of his vocabulary, such as the words *surrogate*, *sublimate*, *overspecialization*, and *tautology*, pointed to someone highly educated.

All these conclusions were verified when Kaczynski was captured: He was in his early fifties, he had grown up in Chicago, he had lived for a time in northern California, and he was well educated, having once been a university professor.

Now is the time to face the fact that you speak a dialect. When you learned language, you learned it as a dialect; if you don’t speak a dialect, you don’t speak. *Dialect* isn’t a label for careless, unlettered, nonstandard speech. A dialect isn’t something to be avoided or cured.

Each language is a great pie. Each slice of that pie is a dialect, and no single slice is the language. Don’t try to change your language into the kind of English that nobody really speaks. Be proud of your slice of the pie.

In the early 1960s, Steinbeck decided to rediscover America in a camper with his French poodle Charley. The writer reported his observations in a book called *Travels with Charley* (1962) and included these thoughts on American dialects:

One of my purposes was to listen, to hear speech, accent, speech rhythms, overtones, and emphasis. For speech is so much more than words and sentences. I did listen everywhere. It seemed to me that regional speech is in the process of disappearing, not gone but going. Forty years of radio and twenty years of television must have this impact. Communications must destroy localness by a slow, inevitable process.

I can remember a time when I could almost pinpoint a man’s place of origin by his speech. That is growing more difficult now and will in some foreseeable future become impossible. It is a rare house or building that is not rigged with spiky combers of the air. Radio and television speech becomes standardized, perhaps better English than we have ever used. Just as our bread, mixed and baked, packaged and sold without benefit of accident or human frailty, is uniformly good and uniformly tasteless, so will our speech become one speech.

Forty years have passed since Steinbeck made that observation, and the hum and buzz of electronic voices have since permeated almost every home across our nation. Formerly, the psalmist tells us, “the voice of the turtle was heard in the land,” but now it is the voice of the broadcaster, with his or her immaculately groomed diction. I hope that American English does not turn into a bland, homogenized, pasteurized, assemblyline product. May our bodacious American English remain tasty and nourishing—full of flavor, variety, and local ingredients.

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