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# Isolation as a Linguistic Construct*

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When creating the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee in the 1930's, the government bought out approximately 6,000 people, many of whose families had lived in the Smokies for a century or more. Realizing that it was displacing a stable folk culture of historic interest, the park service decided to document the traditional life of the area, so in 1937 it hired a graduate student in linguistics from Columbia University named Joseph Sargent Hall to make a record of the lives and lore of its residents. Working through Civilian Conservation Corps camps established to build the park's infrastructure and housing local men who introduced him to prospective informants, Hall spent a summer filling four notebooks with observations in one of the more rugged backwoods of Southern Appalachia. In 1939 he returned for a seven-month stint, filling ten more notebooks and making 165 aluminum and acetate disc recordings of music and interviews.[1]

Given a free hand, Hall's approach to field work was an informal one. He asked few questions and recorded whatever people wanted to say or sing, with the result that he collected many lengthy stories, especially about hunting, and a variety of songs.[2] The speech community—if it can be described as such—that he investigated was a rural one encompassing several hundred square miles. Seeking people anywhere in the mountains that a CCC pickup truck could take him and his heavy recording equipment, he had interviewed or taken notes on the speech of more than 200 people in a six-country area by 1941.

At one session in 1939, an elderly woman sang several Child Ballads for him. After finishing 'Lord Thomas', she rendered 'Come All You Young Ladies' to the untraditional tune of 'On Top of Old Smoky'. Shortly thereafter, she sang 'Come All You Texas Rangers', a song that obviously neither originated in nor was associated with the region. Its singer as likely as not learned it from the radio, perhaps over XERA, a powerful country music station on the Mexican border that could be heard throughout much of the U.S. The contrast between modern and traditional images in this episode is striking, but not unfamiliar to many scholars of Appalachia, for whom such contrasts have been part of mountain life for a long time.

* An earlier version of this paper was read at the 1997 Appalachian Studies Association meeting in Cincinnati. The author is grateful to Philip Obermiller and Anita Puckett for help in formulating ideas and pointing out important references.

Hall's detailed research on mountain speech was unprecedented in his day, and in most ways it remains unsurpassed today. He was the only student of Appalachian English before the 1970s not preoccupied with antiquated speech. To be sure, his work was that of a cultural preservationist, and his 1942 monograph, *The Phonetics of Great Smoky Mountain Speech*, identified many analogues to earlier English usage, but Hall studiously eschewed such labels as 'Elizabethan' and 'Shakespearean', which were (and frequently remain) common currency in studies over the past century and have long skewed perceptions of Appalachian speech.

Hall's analysis of variation was not quantitative, nor did he follow modern principles in sampling informants or comparing data, but he interviewed enough people to obtain a broad picture of Smokies speech. While his speakers lived in rural areas and most had minimal formal schooling and traveled infrequently from their homes, Hall found anything but a uniform variety of speech. He was keenly interested in language change and was able to document generational differences in second-person pronouns (*you'uns* was being replaced by *you all*)[3] and in the merger of /ɛ / and /ɪ/ in *pen* and *pin* (1942:19). His evidence pictured a variety with many old-fashioned terms as well as ongoing change that could not always be attributed to contact with the larger society.

Unlike so many who have written on the subject before and since, however, Hall did not invoke the term 'isolation' to account for archaisms he found in mountain speech. Though enthusiasm for his work occasionally led to romantic or nostalgic statements about mountain culture, he took people on their own terms. This was unusual, for despite the many complexities and inconsistencies that confront the objective observer, commentators from outside have long been inclined, often apparently compelled, to see people in Appalachia or other remote, rural areas as homogeneous and to view their culture as uniform. Their motivations have ranged from a desire to recount colorful or even sensational accounts about these areas to a not-unbenign hope to explain these places to fellow outlanders. But when they apply broad labels like 'Appalachia', 'Southern Highlands', 'African American', 'Southern', etc. based on experience with a few people or with individual communities, writers (including linguists) produce misleading ideas about the culture and language of large segments of people.

For Appalachia, a classic case involved is Horace Kephart's *Our Southern Highlanders* (1913). Scholars of the region are much indebted for the detailed record on many subjects he left behind.[4] A remarkably keen observer, Kephart was far more sympathetic to mountain people than many writers before and after him and wanted to give them their due. At the same time he doubted that he understood mountaineers well enough to write about them. His chapter 'Mountain Dialect' was the first thorough treatment of mountain speech and the only one for another two decades. Kephart's commentary derived largely from his experience in one small, remote area in the southwestern corner of the Smokies, an upper branch of Hazel Creek, Swain County, North Carolina, where he



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lived from 1904 and 1907. Since he almost never qualified his statements, however, readers have naturally assumed that they apply to the entire southern highlands, as his title suggested. Some words he cited have been attested in no other study of mountain speech or in any reference work. Today we cannot know whether the verb *block* 'to blockade, make moonshine' and the noun *bumblings* 'cheap whiskey', among many others he collected, were at the turn of the century localized to one small area or were more widely current in the mountains and merely unrecorded by others. From 1908 to 1910 Kephart traveled about the southern mountains to gauge how typical his Hazel Creek experience was, but in the end he presented as typical much that was rare and exotic from those earlier years.

Kephart's theme and that of many others to the present day is that mountain speech differs from that elsewhere in the U.S. in preserving far more archaic forms. Their routine explanation is that long-term geographical or physical 'isolation' of mountain people has caused their language and culture to lag behind other parts of the country, even, according to some, to be little changed from the days of Shakespeare, or Chaucer. In scholarly and popular literature on mountain speech, the vague and simplistic treatment of the concept of isolation remains prevalent, as does the notion that Southern Appalachia is suspended in time. Many readers have considered Kephart's century-old account still valid for a very large part of the mountains (e.g. Early 1998). An early statement about the effects of isolation came from the novelist John Fox, Jr.:

> In the march of civilization westward, the Southern mountaineer has been left in an isolation almost beyond belief. He was shut off by mountains that blocked and still block the commerce of a century, and there for a century he has stayed. He has had no navigable rivers, no lakes, no coasts, few wagon roads, and often no roads at all except the beds of streams. He has lived in the cabin in which his grandfather was born, and in life, habit and thought he has been merely his grandfather born over again. (Fox 1901:390)

Very similar, if usually less extreme, statements can be cited from every decade of this century. In one recent version professional linguists, Donna Christian, Walt Wolfram, and Nanjo Dube in *Variation and Change in Geographically Isolated Communities: Appalachian English and Ozark English* (1988) state that

> Historically the physical environment has been a very important determining factor in the development of each area [i.e. Appalachia and the Ozarks]. Although the geographical isolation of the past has been overcome to a large extent with modern transportation, evidence of this historical isolation remains. (1988:2).

Such statements are open to question for many reasons, perhaps the greatest being the ease with which writers move from what they see as the physical separation and remoteness of communities to strong, usually unqualified claims about cultural traits preserved over a larger area.

Nowhere has this been more true than for language study, where isolation has long been used by amateur linguists and antiquarians to account for the archaicness of speech in the Appalachian and Ozark mountains, the Outer Banks of North Carolina, and elsewhere. Professional linguists also seem to have accepted this view without scrutiny and have routinely invoked isolation as the only determining factor for the distinctive character of speech in these places. Linguists rarely qualify their use of the term either, and Christian et al.'s statement is little improvement over many earlier ones, since 'isolation' is the only factor external to language the authors cite. They do not discuss, for example, the nature of mountain communities or the functions of language in them.

Linguists need to move beyond a simplistic, static conception of 'isolation' that provides little insight into the culture of mountain and other peripheral communities and that all too often perpetuates stereotypes. The remainder of this essay seeks to come to grips with the use of isolation to account for the culture and speech of Appalachia, the Outer Banks, and other areas that are geographically and economically peripheral. In particular it examines implications of how linguists have used the construct and considers how they might formulate it in a more valid way. Toward the end it will offer a modest proposal for revising it. The focus will be principally on Appalachia.

Literature on the speech of Appalachia, the Outer Banks, and similar areas reveals persistent themes. Most commonly their English is said to be archaic (of Elizabethan, Chaucerian, or other 'ancient' vintage); to be pungent and direct; and to be creative and innovative. These qualities are of course neither absolute nor mutually exclusive, but they have often been highlighted by outsiders who in the process make implicit comparisons with their own speech, the habits of middle-class speakers from their own backgrounds.

For the past decade I have labored on a dictionary of southern mountain English that draws primarily on material from the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee (Montgomery & Hall, forthcoming). With the editing nearly complete, I am writing an introduction that, among other things, seeks to gauge the consistency of the dictionary's contents with themes and images of Appalachian speech, including the ones mentioned above, which have become ingrained in the minds of the public and academics alike. As I see it, there are at least four problems raised by frequent statements in the literature attributing the distinctiveness of mountain speech to isolation.

First, isolation is rarely defined, except in vague and imprecise ways. If we reflect on it, **isolation** may refer to a condition that is

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- sociological (involving the frequency and variety of contact with other communities),



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No doubt these types of isolation are often related, even reinforcing. One's 'isolation' may also involve the extent of one's economic dependence or self-sufficiency, as well as access to media (not a new factor by any means: before television there was radio and before that, newspapers). Apparently most outside commentators mean isolation in the physical sense of remoteness (i.e. distance from urban areas or difficulty of access for the writer), but they either equate physical isolation with infrequency of contact (i.e. social isolation) or assume that it automatically produces other types of isolation, though there is no necessary relationship between proximity and contact, receptiveness to change, etc. While often invoking the concept of isolation, linguists have yet to define it in a way that is sociologically respectable (based on valid, measurable criteria), or anthropologically sensitive (involving analysis of a community on its own terms and based on community perceptions and behavior—what is remoteness for the investigator may not be perceived as such by residents).

The concept of linguistic isolation dates back to the nineteenth century in both popular and professional literature. It was cited by Germanicists and Indo-Europeanists to explain why modern Icelandic closely resembled Old Norse. American commentators have long attributed to 'isolation' archaisms in the speech of not only physically removed communities in Appalachia, the Ozarks, offshore Atlantic islands of North Carolina and Virginia, and other areas, but also socially removed segments of the population such as African Americans, whose limited formal education and strong oral tradition preserved older usages in their speech (e.g. Thom 1883). The linguistic atlas tradition has frequently cited social isolation as accounting for black-white differences in rural speech, especially vocabulary:

> By and large the Southern Negro speaks the language of the white man of his locality or area and level of education. But in some respects his speech is more archaic or old-fashioned; not un-English, but retarded because of lack of schooling. As far as the speech of uneducated Negroes is concerned, it differs little from that of illiterate whites. That is, it exhibits the same regional and social variations as that of the simple white folk. Distinctive Negro speech, the so-called Gullah, is to be found only in those parts of the Low Country of South Carolina and Georgia in which the Negroes have outnumbered the white for two centuries or more. (Kurath 1949:6)

This view was sometimes applied to southern white English to account for the South's distinctive speech in general (Brooks 1937, Pederson 1975). Beginning in the 1950s, sociolinguists began calling urban African-American communities and their speech 'isolated' on the basis of residential and restricted peer-group interaction (Putnam & O'Hearn 1955, Wolfram 1969). Most recently, Wolfram and his associates in work on the Outer Banks and other coastal islands have employed a range of terms in addition to 'isolation' (in the sense of physical separation). For example, Ocracoke is said to be, among other things, 'quasi-isolated' and to have a 'long-standing history of relative isolation' (Wolfram, Schilling-Estes, Hazen, & Craig 1997), to be characterized by 'socio-ecological isolation', 'physical isolation', and 'historical isolation' (Wolfram, Hazen, & Tamburro 1997), and to be 'postinsular' and 'historically insular' (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1999). To date Wolfram et al. have not used terminology consistently, defined their terms in a general way, or explored relationships between different types of isolation, although their research appears to be moving in those directions and has already done much to challenge conventional ideas. In sum, we can see that American linguists may have recognized several types of isolation, but have done little to examine it critically or explore its many dimensions.

Second, however poorly or implicitly 'isolation' has been defined, historians have questioned its validity. Their work, which linguists seem not to have considered, includes Durwood Dunn's account (1988) of Cades Cove, Tennessee, within the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Now presented by the park service as having been a sparsely settled, remote community in the nineteenth century, the cove was actually a thriving settlement of several hundred with strong market ties to Maryville and Knoxville. In fact, few mountain communities lacked regular economic networks; very often they were settled from and were an economic extension of the valley below.

Gene Wilhelm, who has written cogently on the point, has argued that 'the idea that the Appalachian mountains acted as a physical barrier, either for the people living within the mountain region, or for those individuals trying to cross them, hardly stands up against the evidence at hand' and that 'the Appalachian region has been an admixture of cultural contact and socioeconomic enterprise rather than a bastion of isolated individuals and a slow sequence of economic development as previously depicted in the literature' (1977:78, 77). One might question the applicability of his contentions, based on research in the northern Blue Ridge of Virginia only a hundred miles from Washington, D.C., but many of them echo an important essay published in 1913 by John Ashworth about southwestern Virginia.

The few historians of Appalachia that linguists cite with any regularity are those who discuss the region's founding period, and these are apt to give a simplistic view of the principal groups in the region and to gloss over the formidable numbers of people passing through Appalachia



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before the Civil War (which suggests fluid speech communities in many places in the early days). Historians have painted a picture of Appalachia as surprisingly diverse in more recent times—for example, documenting nineteenth and early-twentieth century industrialization (such as logging and mining, both of which brought extensive railroads; see Eller 1982) that came to many places and brought people of Italian, African, Irish, and other ancestries first to work and then to stay. How much of an influence did they have on mountain culture and speech and how much of a model did they provide? Would they not have diversified the language from area to area? Would not the presence of the Cherokee in western North Carolina have left an imprint on the English there? Unfortunately, we know very little about the diversity of Appalachian English, in part because linguists, with one or two exceptions, have yet to become acquainted with the work of not only historians, but also sociologists and anthropologists on diffusion theory, identity formation, ethnicity, and a host of other pertinent subjects.

Linguists are, perhaps like many specialists, a bit naive about the scholarly literature outside their own discipline. They tend to bring to the study of mountain speech models of analysis based on socioeconomic variables that are often not informed by the structure of mountain communities. The most prominent paradigm (that of William Labov) for analyzing social variation in language may work within an urban context using variables such as socioeconomic status and social class, which are based on occupation, education, and income level. But those variables have little usefulness in differentiating groups in small, rural communities and little, if any, psychological or social reality in many parts of the mountains. They reveal little about speech communities there (e.g. Hackenberg 1973, McGreevy 1977).

Third, linguists usually treat isolation as an absolute condition, even though it is inherently relative and varies from place to place; in other words, they have not asked 'isolated as compared to what?' To my knowledge, only historians Gene Wilhelm (1977) for Blue Ridge Virginia and David Hsiung (1989, 1997) and Durwood Dunn for East Tennessee have recognized the relativity of isolation for Appalachia. If not formalized or operationalized (is it one variable or many?, can we construct an index to isolation?) to enable comparison of one community's isolation with another's, 'isolation' can be discussed in only crude and inconsistent ways. Given existing models for identifying an individual's networks (Milroy 1987), 'contact' will most likely be easier to operationalize than 'isolation', but the possible factors involved in both have hardly been identified (see Wolfram, Hazen, & Tamburro 1997 for a study in this direction), much less elaborated. Network analysis will show that isolation is relative within as well as between mountain communities.

With regard to physical isolation, individuals in any community will differ radically in their duration, type, and frequency of contact with outsiders, as some individuals (such as school teachers, store keepers,

clergymen, etc.) will have more contact with the larger culture. However much or little mountain people may have traveled, that is only one dimension of their contact with others.

Is there reason to think that rural communities in Appalachia or the Outer Banks are much more 'isolated' than ones in, for instance, the Carolina Piedmont? Without a method or index for calculating a community's isolation, linguistic patterns that are prevalent in the Smokies or on Ocracoke, areas supposed to exemplify isolation, are easily taken to be distinctive to those areas, when a more accurate, comparative account would almost certainly find them not nearly so distinctive. And without such a method, we cannot break the circularity in reasoning that isolation produces differences and differences prove isolation. Christian et al. (1988) study four grammatical features in Appalachian and Ozark English (their study based on two counties in West Virginia and one in Arkansas): completive *done* (as in 'He done took off'); *a*-prefixing (as 'He come a-runnin' out there'), verb principal parts, and subject-verb agreement. All of these are common throughout the South in the speech of both blacks and whites,[5] a fact that renders dubious the description 'geographically isolated' in their title.[6] In their study, the linguistic evidence supporting historical isolation, which they call a 'determining factor,' is not evident.

Fourth, however implicitly they define isolation, linguists often mistake an observation about an individual community as an explanation for whatever distinctiveness is found in it or, even more problematically, in a larger surrounding region. It is, or should be, a long way from an adequate observation to an adequate description, and at least as far again to an adequate explanation, if we ever arrive at one at all. Outsiders, including linguists, easily impute more explanatory power to physical isolation than is warranted and in so doing reveal as much about themselves as those they study.

Use of the broad label 'Appalachian' for the speech of one or two mountain communities (as in Wolfram & Christian 1976) is also difficult to justify given the size of the region, which has a population of at least 20 million, depending how it is sliced. Official demarcations have ranged from 190 counties (in Ford's 1962 survey), to the 397 counties (in 13 states) according to the Appalachian Regional Commission definition (Walls 1977:70).[7] That such an immense region near large urban areas like Atlanta, Charlotte, and Cincinnati is 'isolated' is hardly plausible, but even if Appalachia has been as thoroughly isolated as often asserted, it does not follow that its language or culture would be uniform. Instead, if parts of the region were cut off from one another, we would more likely and reasonably find innumerable local differences. Any linguistic survey of the larger region would almost certainly discover precisely this, especially in vocabulary, even though any diversity would probably be attributable to local innovations and differential subsequent contact with lowland varieties at least as much as it would to degrees of 'isolation' and selective retention of older forms.



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In short, the more closely we examine the concept of isolation, the more elusive it becomes. Having identified these problems, should we retain and refashion it in a more usable way, or dispense with it altogether? We are a long way from proposing how to measure or operationalize isolation, and with satellite dishes sprouting in the backyards of 'isolated' communities elsewhere, it may be increasingly irrelevant to do so using factors like physical distance. Because of cable television and the Internet, according to McKinney (1996:7), 'it will now be possible to live in rural Appalachia and be thoroughly integrated into the international communications system'.

I would argue that, to the extent that mountain life and culture are conservative, as in many ways surely they are, this derives not from the external factor of physical or geographical isolation, but from internal social and psychological factors such as strong cultural identity, social solidarity, and cohesiveness. This proposal, for which there is not space here to more than begin to sketch, might on reflection come as little surprise, given the many accounts of people in small, rural communities having a strongly rooted culture, being intensely loyal to their families and attached to their home places, intent on keeping outsiders at a distance, and so on. Whether these qualities very often have a relation to geographical remoteness is at best debatable.

I doubt neither the realities of different types of isolation nor the scholarly usefulness of the concept once it is properly defined. But to date, linguists have employed isolation as a simplistic, often facile explanatory device. In the process they have ignored the integrity and the dynamic nature of traditional rural communities like those in Appalachia and failed to improve our understanding of how they relate to the larger society of which they have always been aware and with which they had contact. A broader, more accurate view sees people in Appalachia as choosing the quantity and quality of their cultural and social interaction, rather than as passively receiving whatever external culture and language comes their way, in other words as voluntarily regulating their contact with outsiders (who in mountain idiom are often referred to as 'foreigners', to emphasize the distance that natives feel from them). This is true today, and there's no obvious reason why it wouldn't have been true for generations. Appalachian communities have certainly differed from place to place, but many were not isolated so much as detached. What they considered independence and self-reliance was often seen by modern, mainstream culture to be remoteness and backwardness. For a long time in the Smoky Mountains, people rarely migrated into the city except under extreme economic duress. Wilhelm says as much: 'If [mountain people] were not "of the world" it is not because they were ignorant of the outside ways of life, but because they had seen it, reflected upon it, and almost totally rejected it' (1977:89).

This view argues that its internal dynamics provides a much better explanation of the conservativeness of speech in the mountains and on the Outer Banks than any degree of physical isolation. Since its

members are strongly rooted to it and have strong local identities, the culture in such places is less open to change—less *permeable* one might say—than elsewhere. The landscape provides them with a buffer from the larger society. For many things such as language, physical proximity to mainstream culture is far less crucial than psychological orientation to change. Many in Appalachia are not only attached to traditional ways, but suspicious of, if not resistant to, change; they want to consider it carefully before adopting it and then adopt it only on their own terms. It would be surprising if this orientation were not reflected symbolically in maintenance of speech patterns.

A relative lack of permeability may lead regional and ethnic cultures in close proximity to, or even within, major urban areas in daily contact with the larger culture (e.g. through the media) to maintain and even assert their distinctiveness. A striking instance of this is African-American culture and speech in many large American cities, which appears to be as vigorous and distinct as ever. Thus, it is not necessarily the case that proximity and continuing exposure to other varieties produces linguistic change. To consider 'isolation' to be a cultural determinant is to assume that language would necessarily have changed otherwise and to give no validity to a group's ability to filter out contact with the larger society.

As a linguist, I have attempted to identify fundamental problems in how my profession usually uses the construct of isolation uncritically in analyzing the language of geographically or economically peripheral communities. In linguistic studies the view that the speech of such places is a product of 'isolation' remains dominant, and the concept has yet to receive a critical evaluation. It continues to be used in one way or another to 'explain' far too much. Few linguists would claim that mountain culture exists in a vacuum today, but the manner in which they have cited and employed the construct of isolation has had the same practical effect. In this essay I hope to have provided a constructive critique and a modest proposal. Meanwhile, folks in the Smokies and on Ocracoke, who have contact with 'foreigners' on a voluntary basis, continue to be just as 'isolated' as they very well want to be.



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## NOTES

[1] Hall's work under the auspices of the National Park Service dated from 1937-40, but he continued to collect in 1941 and on periodic visits to the mountains over the next three decades. Portions of his material are deposited in the library of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and at the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University. Duplicates of his recordings and most of his materials are in the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress.

[2] Further information on Hall's fieldwork can be found in Hall (1941, 1942) and in Montgomery (1994).

[3] According to Hall, 'the pronoun of the second person plural, *you-ones* [ˈjuənz], maintains its vitality in familiar use among speakers of all ages and classes. Some very well-bred mountain people have been observed to say it. Steadily encroaching upon it, however, is [ˈjuˌɔl] or [jɔl] (more familiar), as in [jɔˑl ˈkʌm ˈbæk] (hospitable invitation to return)' (1942: 39).

[4] Kephart's notebooks are deposited in the Special Collections Department of Hunter Library at Western Carolina University.

[5] The authors acknowledge this, but only in their conclusion (1988:135).

[6] Christian et al. state that 'in the study that follows, the terms "Appalachian English" (abbreviated AE) and "Ozark English" (OE) will be used in a somewhat loose way. They are not intended as a reference to the speech of all the people who live in Appalachia or in the Ozarks even if these regions are defined quite narrowly' and that 'what is being described is, in actuality, the speech only of those residents of the area who became members of the sample, by and large part of the working-class rural population' (1988:6-7). However, the authors' use of the broad designations 'Appalachian' and 'Ozark' throughout their work (to the exclusion of 'West Virginia' and 'Arkansas' or narrower terms such as the names of counties or communities) inevitably implies that the speech of those residents is representative of the two larger mountain regions and that their speech is more-or-less distinctive to the mountains. In this respect it is interesting that Joseph Hall used only 'Smoky Mountain English', even though he investigated an area several times as large as the two counties of West Virginia upon which Wolfram and Christian based their book *Appalachian Speech* (1976).

[7] Under the Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1963, Congress defined Appalachia as extending from the Mohawk Valley in New York to the fall-line hills of Mississippi (Widner 1967).