Language

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Characterized by distinctive sounds, syntax, and originality, Appalachian speech has long served as an emblem of the region's natives—one that has inspired contradictory, fanciful, and sometimes far-fetched notions about the people and their culture. The linguistic dexterity of Appalachian speakers—storytellers, preachers, politicians, and common folk—and their seemingly archaic vocabulary and phrasing have fascinated outsiders for more than a century and a half. Appalachians have been romanticized as surviving speakers of Elizabethan English yet simultaneously ridiculed as backward users of a lower-class, substandard dialect reflecting the region's isolation and poverty. Whether fostering positive or negative stereotypes, the way Appalachians speak has frequently marked them as different, generating many attempts to explain still another aspect of the region's "otherness."

No single way of looking at the subject adequately explains the complex roles that the English language has played in the life and history of Appalachia and its people. Though mountain speech is often believed to be the most distinctively regional variety in America, Appalachia is not home to a single dialect. Research has shown that the ancestry of Appalachian speech is quite mixed and that in many ways it represents a microcosm of American English. Educator and social researcher John C. Campbell famously observed in 1921 that Appalachia was a land "about which, perhaps, more things are known that are not true than of any part of our country." This statement pertains particularly well to the English spoken there.

Europeans were relative latecomers to Appalachia, first engaging native speakers of Iroquoian languages about 1540, when the Spanish under Hernando de Soto encountered the Cherokee in the hill country and mountains of the present-day Carolinas. Within a century French traders had made contact with the Cherokee's Iroquoian-speaking cousins, including the Oneida and Seneca, in the foothills of New York. Neither Spanish nor French took hold, however, and it was not until the early eighteenth century, when Germans and English-speaking Scotch-Irish pressed into central Pennsylvania, that European languages took root in the region.

Dating from the late-seventeenth century, *Scotch-Irish* is the oldest name in the United States for emigrants from Ulster, the northernmost province of Ireland, and their descendants. Most of their earlier ancestors came from Lowland Scotland, where for centuries people were known as Scotch (but now usually as Scots). This

Facing page: Multilingual sign at a coal mine, Kempton, West Virginia, 1939. Although Appalachia was settled mostly by English speakers, this sign in English, German, Lithuanian, Italian, Hungarian, Czech, and Polish attests to the diversity of languages found in the region.

historical fact is preserved in *Scotch-Irish*, a name Americans have continued to employ. Also (but much less often) known as the Scots-Irish, most of the 150,000 or more Ulster emigrants who came in the American colonial period settled in the interior, where they and their culture and language became influential in much of Appalachia. Because *Scotch-Irish* has been the more common name for three centuries and remains so among descendants in Appalachia, it is used in this section in observance of the linguistic right a group has to name itself.

In the nineteenth century, small groups of Welsh, French, and other Europeans also came to Appalachia, but only English and German ever became community languages. The latter declined precipitously in the twentieth century, as did native languages. In modern Appalachia, English is known by all except for very recent migrants (such as Mexicans in north Georgia), though misconceptions, myths, and misinformed stereotypes about its speakers abound.

Indeed, the English language in Appalachia has long captivated journalists, travelers, and educators, and since the 1880s they have stressed one quality above all others—its conservatism. Writers have consistently been struck by the older usages retained in the mountains. An early and still frequent explanation for these archaic elements was that mountain speech was "Elizabethan" or "Shakespearean." Suggestions of such respectable roots have largely been discredited, though, and Appalachian speech is more often considered an inferior type of English and therefore an impediment to social mobility and educational progress. These conflicting views have simultaneously romanticized mountain speech (and by implication its users) as quaint while stigmatizing it as improper and ungrammatical. The public, scholars included, appears to have no difficulty holding contradictory ideas about the English language spoken in Appalachia.

Influenced by early backwoods humorists' use of dialogue, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers such as humorist George Washington Harris and novelist Mary Noailles Murfree created generally negative images through their fictional portrayals of mountain speakers. Both employed contorted spellings to enhance their portrayals of illiterate, dialect-speaking characters. "Thar's nun ove 'em fas' enuf tu ketch me" is typical dialog from one of Harris's mountain characters. Many of these forms later made their way into the *Barney Google* comic strip after Snuffy Smith was introduced to it in 1934. Reinforcing this stereotypical image since that time have been countless books, movies, television programs, and tourist-shop caricatures conveying the popular but erroneous belief that such usages as *plumb* "completely," as in "He fell plumb to the bottom," and *right smart* "a good deal (of)," as in "They lost a right smart in that trade," among others, are found only in mountain speech. No matter how ludicrous, portrayals of mountain English in the media are often considered accurate outside Appalachia and consequently reinforce perceptions that mountain people are different and backward.

Writers have also pointed out the expressiveness and adaptability of mountain speech and the resourcefulness of its speakers, however. These positive qualities are appreciated in fresh metaphors such as *kick* "reject in courtship" and *can see to can't see* "dawn to dusk"; vivid similes *(meaner than a striped snake; as thick as fiddlers in hell)*; abundant use of proverbs; descriptive place names such as Hell for Certain, Kentucky; novel conversions of one part of speech to another (the noun *manpower* as a verb meaning "move by brute effort," as in "We'll have to manpower that log up"); and in other ways.

Because the Appalachians cover a vast area from the Northeast to the Deep South, the region is too large to form a distinct or unified region in traditional cul-

ture or speech. Instead, linguists focus on the Midland dialect region, a smaller area stretching westward and southwestward from its cultural and linguistic seedbed in central Pennsylvania, where English was first planted in the region, to northern Alabama. This region is subdivided into the North Midland (northern West Virginia, northwestern Maryland, and most of Pennsylvania) and the South Midland (southern West Virginia, western Virginia, western North and South Carolina, eastern Kentucky, east Tennessee, north Georgia, and north Alabama).

Several factors worked against Appalachia's becoming a distinct, cohesive dialect area of its own. Settlement by different groups or different proportions of groups produced local variations within the region. Migration within the region has mixed the languages of the English, Scotch-Irish, Germans, and other settler groups in various ways, leveling differences in their speech and spawning innovations. Research by the American Linguistic Atlas Project, a systematic national survey of traditional vocabulary initiated in the 1930s, found only seventeen words and phrases by and large distinctive to the Midland region. Some of these are *bawl* "a calf's cry"; *blinds* "window shutters"; *bull* "to shell," as in "to hull beans or peas"; and *poke* "paper bag," as in "She bought a poke of peanuts." Six others are common to the North Midland (*jag* "armful of corn"; *run* "creek") and five (*jacket* "vest"; *fireboard* "mantel," as in "Lydia set her clock proudly on the fireboard") to the South Midland.

Another survey, conducted in the 1960s in connection with the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, found four strictly Appalachian terms: *spring house* "small building over a spring in which to keep foodstuffs cool," as in "Pickled beans and kraut were kept in the spring house"; *poke* "paper bag"; *whistle pig* "groundhog"; and *lay out* "to play truant from work or school." Since then, the dictionary has labeled 46 items "Appalachian" and 123 others "southern Appalachian" because they appear to be concentrated in those regions. Interestingly, the dictionary labels some items as "now Appalachian," including *gaum* "a mess," as in "He left everything in a gaum." This suggests that much of what is popularly thought to be Appalachian is simply disused, old-fashioned English outside the region.

This scarcity of evidence for geographically defined Appalachian English has led some scholars to consider whether such entities as "Appalachian English" and "Southern Appalachian English" exist or whether they are more strongly linked to cultural solidarity than geography and common usage. Mountain people's strong sense of place, cohesive communities, and attachments to traditional lifestyles and values, it is believed, make them less willing to change or accommodate to mainstream culture. This resistance to change is reflected in the tendency to retain speech habits, even a generation or more after a person has moved to a metropolitan area such as Chicago, Detroit, or Cincinnati. Like people who stayed back home, these migrants often consciously distinguish themselves from people outside their communities, as in pronouncing *Appalachia* with the third syllable as *latch* rather than *lay*, a development that has grown steadily since the 1960s and reflects regional consciousness and a reaction to the pronunciation of members of the media and government officials.

The existence of many archaisms in mountain speech has prompted more study of its origins than that of any other regional American English variety. Three sources of origin are commonly proposed: that these archaisms are traceable mainly to Elizabethan England, to eighteenth-century colonial America, or to Ulster (by way of the Scotch-Irish). It is easy to oversimplify this issue because no type of speech came to North America without mixing with others immediately after arrival, because retentions represent only part of the larger history of mountain speech, and because no type of American English, no matter how isolated, has remained static.

The Elizabethan, or Shakespearean, connection is the most popular but has the least historical and linguistic support. People from the British Isles who settled in Appalachia began arriving in North America more than a century after the Elizabethan period of the late sixteenth century. Furthermore, the source of most Appalachian vocabulary has been Britain in general (not just England) and to a lesser extent northern England (*galluses* "suspenders"; *palings* "fence posts"), western England (*counterpane* "bedspread," as in "We sleep under a counterpane"), and Scotland (*chancy* "doubtful," as in "Hit was a chancy sort of thing to do"; *sop* "gravy," as in "We ate light bread and sop").

The myth of Elizabethan English was formulated and promoted by people from areas outside the Appalachians who recognized some mountain usages (*afeared* "afraid," as in "He wasn't afeared of them in the least bit") as being also in the works of Shakespeare. Some came to know mountain people firsthand, and they attempted to counter negative stereotypes by highlighting their positive qualities. Although this Elizabethan connection has little scholarly basis, it and related ideas have flourished as cultural myths, possibly because the region retains immense value for countless Americans elsewhere who lack cultural roots. They view the language and culture—and especially the music—of Appalachia as valuable storehouses of tradition, less affected by mass society and more closely tied to the past. Historically, however, this romantic notion has not saved Appalachia from neglect, marginalization, and exploitation by the rest of the nation.

For both pronunciations and grammar patterns a better case can be made for colonial American than for English roots. For example, *blowed* and *knowed* as the past tense and past participle of *blow* and *know* do not occur in Shakespeare but were fairly common among eighteenth-century English immigrants to the American colonies. The use of these verb forms is still common in Appalachia, though they have long been considered nonstandard in the United States. Such colonial American forms in mountain speech are far more numerous than supposed Elizabethan ones.

Associated with both of these explanations is the alleged influence of geographic and cultural isolation on Appalachian speech. This is largely a myth, based on the false beliefs that Appalachia is culturally homogenous and that physical isolation caused life in the mountains to move slowly, even to become frozen in time. Archaic speechways, along with traditional ballads, Jack tales, folk dancing, and weaving, supposedly prove that Appalachian culture is static. Historians have pointed out that mountain communities are quite typical of rural America, however, and while these traditions might seem perfect examples of cultural preservations from centuries past, studies have found them to be living and dynamic. Mountain people still write ballads to recount modern tragedies, disasters, and star-crossed love, but these are timeless themes, not archaic ones.

The third commonly cited origin of Appalachian speech is that it derives mainly from people from Ulster, the Scotch-Irish. Most of the 150,000 or more emigrants who left Ulster in the eighteenth century settled in the American interior, becoming known as Scotch-Irish. Many of them moved into the hills and valleys of Appalachia, but only traces of modern-day Appalachian pronunciation are attributable to them. In vocabulary a few Scotch-Irish contributions to the region are *airish* "chilly," as in "It was an awful airish day"; *brickle* "brittle," as in "The dry leaves were brickle and crumbled easily"; *discomfit* "to inconvenience," as in "I wouldn't want to discomfit you"; and *ill* "bad-tempered," as in "That dog is ill as a hornet."

The Scotch-Irish contribution to regional grammar has been even more significant, as evidenced in the formation of words (by combining *'un* "one" with adjec-

tives and pronouns, as in "young'un," "big'un," and "you'uns"); phrases (*need* followed by a verb past participle, as in "That boy needs taught a lesson"); compound helping verbs ("I wonder if you might could help me"); and clauses (*whenever* for "at the time that," as in "Whenever I was young, people didn't do such a thing"). The English of Appalachia resembles the language of Shakespeare's England not nearly so much as that of eighteenth-century Ulster.

Even so, only about 20 percent of Appalachian pronunciations, vocabulary, and grammatical patterns not shared by the rest of the nation can be traced to the British Isles. This percentage is higher than for most other varieties, but it indicates that the foremost component of American speech in general, and Appalachian speech in particular, is new vocabulary. Borrowings and inventions are continually needed as speakers face new challenges of environment and culture.

Most terms identified as Appalachian by the *Dictionary of American Regional English* and other sources were actually born in America (*bald* "treeless area on a mountaintop"; *flannel cake* "pancake"). Of the seventeen Midland items identified by the American Linguistic Atlas Project, most are unambiguously American in origin and represent responses to the New World (*lamp oil* "kerosene"; *sugar tree* "sugar maple"). Six at most (*piece* "snack"; *want in* "want to go/come in," as in "That dog doesn't know whether he wants in or out") may have come from Ulster (though much of the English of Ulster is shared with northern England and Scotland and is, historically speaking, derived from those regions).

Contributions to Appalachian speech from other languages have been insignificant. Other than many surnames in the region, few linguistic traces of German exist outside Pennsylvania, where the language shows in words such as *smearcase* "cottage cheese," from German *schmier* "spread" and *Käse* "cheese." Irish Gaelic/Scottish Gaelic inheritance is also scant and consists mainly of vocabulary. Terms such as *brogan* "heavy, homemade leather shoe," *bonny clabber* "curdled sour milk," and *muley* "hornless cow," as in "Let's get our muley cow from the field," already had been absorbed by the English-speaking Scotch-Irish before they left Ulster, and no evidence for a community of Gaelic speakers in Appalachia has been documented. Other European languages such as Spanish (*doney* "sweetheart") and French contributed even less to Appalachian speech. The lack of influence from Cherokee is both striking and puzzling. Because so much medicinal and other lore was borrowed by whites from the Cherokee in southern Appalachia, as well as the names of so many rivers, mountains, and other topographical features, there is no ready explanation for the absence of common vocabulary such as Cherokee names of plants.

Many features of grammar and pronunciation are also found elsewhere, especially in the Deep South, but occur with a higher frequency in Appalachian English, distinguishing it from other varieties. Some of these common grammatical patterns, such as *a-* as a prefix on verb present participles *(a-goin'; a-comin')* and possessive pronouns with the suffix *-n* (*hern; hisn; yourn*, as in "a book of yourn"), came from England. Emigrants from Ulster introduced others, such as personal pronouns *hit* "it" and *you'uns* "you (plural)" and *all* after pronouns to indicate inclusion: *who all* and *what all*, as in "Who all came and what all did they say?"

Verbs with the same form for the past tense and past participle as well as present tense *(come; eat; run)* and the addition of *-est* to form the superlative of adjectives ending in *-ing (workingest* "working the hardest or most," as in "the workingest fellow in town"; *singingest)* exhibit a general ancestry from the British Isles, while the reversal of word elements (*everwhat* "whatever"; *everwho* "whoever," as in "Everwho hears that will be surprised") and the use of prepositions in series

("There was several houses on up around on Mill Creek") are apparently American developments.

Many common patterns of pronunciation reflect the general English of colonial days. These include final *-a* pronounced as *-y* (*opry* "opera"; *extry* "extra," as in "The soup needs an extry pinch of salt") and heavy use of *r*, including addition of the sound to some words (*mater* "tomato"; *warsh* "wash").

Other pronunciations are more recent developments shared with the Deep South: prolonging and splitting of vowels into two syllables (*red* as *re-uhd* or *ray-uhd; rib* as *ri-uhb*, a pattern sometimes known as the "southern drawl"); shifting of accent to the first syllable of a word *(IN-surance; PO-lice)*; modification of "long *i*" to *ah* in certain contexts, so that *my right side* sounds like *mah raht sahd*, *wire* rhymes with either *car* or *war*; and *tile* rhymes with *tall;* and pronouncing the same vowel sound in word pairs such as *pen/pin* and *gem/Jim*.

Mountain speech has retained or created senses of words unfamiliar elsewhere in the United States that can result in miscommunication. In the Great Smoky Mountains someone might be heard to say, "A lot of mountain people are kind of backward, but I don't care to talk to nobody." By this is meant that while others are shy, the speaker does not mind (in fact, enjoys) talking to strangers. If someone says they are "hard to hear," they may mean, depending on the context, that they have difficulty hearing others, as well as that they are soft-spoken. Other common words having variant meanings in the mountains include *several* "quite a few," as in "We picked several blackberries this summer," *clever* "hospitable," as in "You'll find people very clever here in the mountains," and *ill* "bad-tempered."

Many social factors influence the use of Appalachian speech by individuals: formality of a given situation, respective ages and occupations, level of education, and so on. Less educated working-class speakers are more likely to use speech considered typically Appalachian, though some features of pronunciation are used at all social or educational levels (except in northern parts of Appalachia). Examples include modification of "long *i*" to *ah* in words like *time* and *my* and the pronunciation of words like *pen* and *gem* as *pin* and *Jim*. These are completely "standard" in Appalachia and in much of the South.

Vocabulary varies mainly by subregion within Appalachia or by the age or "ruralness" of the speaker. More modern, national terms have been rapidly displacing older, rural counterparts, especially among younger inhabitants. A recent study of students at a small western North Carolina college found a dramatic loss of regional vocabulary; for instance, *living room*, *gutters*, *mantel*, and *attic* had completely replaced *big house*, *eaves trough*, *fireboard*, and *loft.*

Because it brings speakers into contact with national norms, formal education enables speakers, especially younger ones, to shift between varieties of English according to a given situation. But it also produces self-consciousness or defensiveness about differences between their "home English" and "school English," pitting the values of family and place against the larger world and striving for the mobility to enter it. Because of the pressure to conform to local norms in much of rural Appalachia, an individual's level of education often does not strongly influence the way he or she speaks.

Too often one still finds the view that American dialects such as Appalachian speech are only modifications of Standard English "incorrectly learned" due to social backwardness or even mental deficiency. Educators and linguists have argued against these views for a long time, but the association of mountain English with impoverished, low-status speakers has resisted arguments of its respectable heritage. Unfor-

tunately, some mountain people also have accepted this negative evaluation of their English.

No region, community, or person is uniform in speech, of course. Variation and change in languages are natural and universal. In Appalachia, language has been shaped by the region's history of frontier settlement, its geographic breadth, the diversity of peoples and cultures coming in contact there, and the constant adaptation by speakers to meet their needs. Like other types of American speech, language in Appalachia will continue to bend somewhat to the forces standardizing American culture. But in the end, it will persist because of the strong cultural cohesion and the sense of social and regional identity it provides to its speakers, even in the face of misunderstanding and pressure to conform.

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