

Americana

DIALECTS—

HOW THEY GOT THAT WAY

C. K. Thomas

THE CLICHÉS of linguistic Americana include such items as the buttoned-up Vermonter who allows as how mebbe it'll rain and mebbe it wunt; the sho-nuff Mis'sippi honey chile; and the Brooklynite who drops dese, dem, and doity out of the corner of his mouth. Exaggerated and inaccurate as these clichés often are, they nevertheless indicate our awareness that life is not exactly the same in Vermont, Mississippi, and Brooklyn, and that daily living doesn't sound the same.

Most of us feel that things are ordered normally in our home towns, and that Brooklyn, Natchez, and Bellows Falls (unless we happen to live in one of them) are a bit quaint.

.....
G. K. Thomas teaches Speech at Cornell. His article, "Speaking Frankly," which appeared in our September issue, defended the various American "dialects." Now in this contribution Mr. Thomas traces the origins of American dialects.

However we react to the differences, we recognize that there are a good many regional differences in our habits of life, including our habits of speaking. For some of us, regional habits of speech, except for our own, are deplorable dialects. For others, they are admirable examples of the variety of American life. For students of sociology and linguistics, who are supposed to be scientific and dispassionate, the dialects represent laboratory data to be analyzed.

For a few minutes, then, let's look at the dialects as impartially as we can, and see how they got that way. If we visit the British Isles we find an even wider range; Mississippi, Kentucky, and Vermont sound much more nearly alike than do, say, Devon and Yorkshire. English in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Hawaii, Bermuda, and the Falkland Islands adds to the variety. And yet every English dialect, from York to New York to Cape York, is

a lineal descendant of the Germanic dialects brought into Romanized Celtic Britain by the Angles and Saxons. For fifteen hundred years small boys have learned English from parents, from older brothers and sisters, and from older playmates, in an unbroken continuity of English speech.

No Englishman of Anglo-Saxon times was aware of any greater difference between the speech of his father Aethelred and that of his son Wulfstan than does Joe Doakes Jr. notice between Joe Doakes Sr. and Joe Doakes III. But all the time the language has been changing, until today it is impossible to read the literature of Anglo-Saxon England without studying it as we study Polish or Hindustani. Even Shakespeare puzzles us with an occasional word or phrase. Chaucer sends us to the glossary in the back of the book. Before Chaucer, most of us give up.

Why? We learn to speak by imitating what we hear, but we never imitate exactly. In the course of a few generations, minor changes have piled up and become major, especially if we get out of touch with one another. In a world which has accustomed us to transoceanic airplane flights and virtually instantaneous radio communication, we find it harder every year to realize that this state of affairs was not always so. For the greater part of human history most men had few

opportunities to meet anybody who lived at any distance. A medieval peasant might live and die within an area of a few square miles and know a few hundred people. A medieval "Mississippi" might be only a few miles from a medieval "Vermont," but a visitor from one spot to the other might be even rarer than a Vermont license plate in a present-day Mississippi village. Isolation permits a community to develop by itself, at its own rate of speed, and in its own direction. Thus a language which is spoken in a number of isolated communities is bound, in time, to break up into what we call dialects if the differences are small, or separate languages if the differences are large.

INDEED, the development of separate English dialects is only a part of the much larger development which the linguistic scholars of the nineteenth century managed to analyze. It was known, to begin with, that present-day French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Rumanian had developed from the Latin brought to those outposts of empire by the Roman legionnaires, and that Latin had developed into Italian at home. Not the highly stylized Latin of Cicero and Virgil, to whom a horse was an *equus*, but the Latin of the man in the street, to whom it was a *caballus*, a word which developed into *cavallo* in Italy, *caballo* in Spain, and *cheval* in France.

The obvious relationship of the Romance languages to Latin was one clue. Certain obvious similarities between English, Dutch, German, and the Scandinavian languages provided another. German *Vater*, *Mutter*, *Bruder*, and *Schwester* were so obviously similar to English father, mother, brother, and sister that something more than a chance relationship had to be involved. Sparked by the discovery of Sanscrit, an ancient language of India that showed certain resemblances to both Latin and Greek, the linguistic scholars got down to work and spent a good part of the nineteenth century working out the family tree of the languages of Europe.

The English part of the family tree looks something like this. The Anglo-Saxon invaders of Britain left other speakers of Anglo-Saxon dialects behind them on the Frisian Islands off the Dutch coast. Similarities in speech extending from the Dutch coast to the low country lying south of the Baltic implied an early Low German speech from which the later dialects developed. Further investigation showed the High German dialects of the high country further from the Baltic and North Seas must have developed, like the Low German, from an earlier West Germanic common speech. The family tree thus shows that English and Dutch are first cousins; English and German, second cousins.

Pushing their investigations fur-

ther back, the scholars were able to establish the earlier existence of a common Germanic language, which was the ancestor not only of the West Germanic, but also of the North Germanic or Scandinavian languages, and the extinct East Germanic or Gothic language. And now, with a full head of steam, the linguists pushed on to their climax — the demonstration that most of the languages of Europe and some in India and western Asia were descended from a common ancestral language which they promptly labeled Indo-European.

LET'S SPECULATE about these Indo-Europeans of ten or twelve thousand years ago. We don't know anything about them except for their language, but we can make a few reasonable assumptions. To have a common language they must have lived together, perhaps in some sort of tribal organization. There couldn't have been many of them; primitive life can hardly be metropolitan. How did they break up into separate groups speaking Germanic, Celtic, Slavic, and all the other varieties? Probably the hunting or grazing lands of the tribe became insufficient as the babies kept on coming, and some of the tribesmen had to wander off in search of new land. In the course of time they spread out and lost touch with one another, as one contingent after another wandered off to greener pastures and the de-

velopment of its own dialect in its own way. Eventually, of course, they turned up at the right places on the map as Romans and Greeks and Gauls and Germans in the ancient history books.

From this speculation let's turn to something we can pin down more exactly. Picture the Atlantic world early in the seventeenth century. By now the Indo-Europeans are speaking Spanish and Portuguese, French and Dutch, and English — Early Modern English, to use a term which wouldn't have been understood at the time. Small groups of Europeans were establishing themselves on the western shores of the Atlantic. For the English, as well as some of the others, the language situation has become complicated. Throughout the Middle Ages English was a mass of dialects, but by the seventeenth century there had emerged a kind of court-commercial-big-city dialect in London which acquired a higher prestige than the others, and whose influence spread over a considerable part of England. Some of the settlers in America were undoubtedly affected by this social standard, but even in London it was an upper-class dialect and the settlers were by no means drawn mainly from the upper classes. Many of them, in both New England and Virginia, however, came from southern English counties with dialects akin to that of London. On the other hand, many of the Quakers

who settled Philadelphia came from the north of England, where the London standard had made less headway. And the eighteenth century brought large numbers of Scotch-Irish (Scotch Presbyterians transplanted to Northern Ireland), who settled in the Appalachians and elsewhere along the frontier.

Thus even at the outset the Americans spoke different dialects of English, and if they were not as completely isolated from England as the ancestors of the Germans were from the rest of the Indo-Europeans, nevertheless they were effectively isolated by twentieth-century standards. An occasional ship put in from England, but none arrived in time to save Sir Walter Raleigh's colony on Roanoke Island. As late as 1815 the Battle of New Orleans could be fought before news reached either army that the peace treaty had been signed. Ships could get from Boston to New Amsterdam, Charleston, and the West Indies, but the back country was another matter. Overland travel between the coastal settlements meant breaking one's way through forests and swamps and past lurking redskins.

All this adds up to isolation and the necessity for the English-speaking settlements to get along for a considerable time on their own. Long enough, as it turned out, for the already existing dialects to become a little less similar, and for accidents of geography and colonial

history to affect twentieth-century regional speech patterns.

FOR INSTANCE, the spread of settlers from the Boston area never got beyond the Connecticut River except in northern Massachusetts and eastern Vermont. The settlements on Long Island Sound, on the other hand, spread northward through the river valleys into western Massachusetts and the Lake Champlain Valley into western Vermont. Isolated from Boston, they developed their own speech patterns and laid the foundation for the speech that was to sweep across upper New York state and on to Ohio, Iowa, and Oregon. The "Havvad" type of Boston speech never took root in this area, which retained the sturdy *r* of traditional English.

The peaks of the mountain ranges extending from northeast to southwest across Pennsylvania marked the frontier on the eve of the Revolution; they mark the speech boundary between eastern and western Pennsylvania today. After the Revolution the Scotch-Irish led the way into western Pennsylvania, modifying the dialect as they did so.

From Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the Quakers, Scotch-Irish, and Germans made their way south into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and the southern highlands, pronouncing the *r* of farm and corn while the coastal southerners were beginning

to lose it. Some of the traveling families turned back toward the sea again, and mountain speech came down the valleys and echoed on the Georgia and Carolina plains to contrast with the neighboring plantation speech. Other families turned west through Cumberland Gap into the hill country of Tennessee and Kentucky while the plantation southerners were making their way up the Mississippi. At Paducah, Kentucky, at Cairo, Illinois, and in Missouri the Pennsylvania and southern streams mingled. Across Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, Pennsylvania and New England rubbed elbows, producing a highly complex dialectal pattern for later generations. Westward the streams crossed and recrossed to form even more complex patterns.

Essentially, the transplanting of English to the Western Hemisphere represents, in miniature, the same forces and tendencies that produced the languages and dialects of Europe from the parent Indo-European speech. But where isolation was extreme in prehistoric Europe, and even in Anglo-Saxon England, it has never been as extreme in the era of American colonization and national growth.

Political developments in Western Europe produced a centralization which this hemisphere never knew. The prestige of the upper-class dialect of London enabled it to become an upper-class standard for

most of England, though York and Liverpool tolerated it rather than embraced it. The speech of Paris acquired a similar prestige in France, though Canadian French goes back to Normandy, not to Paris. And the relatively late unification of Spain left American Spanish quite as dependent on other Spanish dialects as on Castilian. Spanish America developed no Madrid of its own, nor did North America, despite London, Ontario, develop a London. No single North American city combined the functions of political and commercial capital and cultural center. The separate regions, the separate cities, developed by themselves with their own standards of what sounded right and normal and what sounded outlandish and funny.

Within the last generation, of course, the radio and the automobile have made us conscious of our differences. The radio industry has made a few half-hearted attempts at uniformity, the "neutral" speech of the radio being basically the type which spread from the Long Island Sound settlements across upstate New York to the Great Lakes country. This type may of course sound neutral in Cleveland and Des Moines, but it doesn't in Philadelphia, Boston, Atlanta, and Houston. Furthermore, the eastern announcers on national hookups have frequently added specifically eastern details, like *ahsk* and *bothuh*, sometimes intentionally and inconsistently, sometimes un-

intentionally because they used their own variety of eastern speech. The resulting "neutral" type is likely to be as neutral as hash, and as uninteresting. If American speech becomes more uniform, that uniformity will probably owe more to the automobile than to the radio. Our migratory habits give today's kids the opportunity to hear more varieties of English than their parents ever heard at an equally impressionable age.

TO THE STUDENT of linguistics a dialect is merely a subdivision of a language. Some dialects represent regional differences; others, class differences. Where class differences mean much, class dialects will also mean much; in this country they have never meant much. Where regional differences and regional pride mean much, regional dialects will also mean much; in this country they have always meant much. The dialects themselves represent the culmination of the linguistic forces that have been brought to bear on each of us: the patterns set by parents, childhood playmates, and neighbors; by parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents back to the Indo-Europeans.

So long as Atlanta, Pittsburgh, and Boston remain conscious of being Atlanta, Pittsburgh, and Boston, the dialects are likely to remain rooted deep in our life. It's too soon to start writing obituaries for them.

Alfred Werner

The Painting Plague

Self-Expression on Sunday

YEARS AGO the German satirist Erich Kaestner, known here chiefly for his amusing children's tale, *Emil and the Detectives*, published a bitter poem about a certain Herr Schmidt — the equivalent of our John Doe — who fell victim to the machine age. Herr Schmidt's life was one daily round of monotonous work, with the exception of a solitary nocturnal respite when "Ein Stündchen blieb für höhere Interessen" — when there was one little hour left for "higher things." But rack his brains as he might, poor Herr Schmidt could not think what to do with this spare hour. So "in dem Stündchen, das ihm übrigblieb, bracht' er sich um" — so in this one brief hour permitted him by the murderous system, he killed himself.

John Doe would never have been

Alfred Werner has published articles in the American Scholar, Antioch Review, Commentary and other journals. He is the author of a number of books on art and artists, the latest being on Utrillo.

at such a loss: he would have taken up a hobby. If, like the unfortunate Herr Schmidt, he were a member of the urban middle class, the chances are good that he would have gone in for painting — in the past twenty years or so America has become convinced that "everybody can paint."

Of course, there is hardly a country without its "Sunday painters"; but nowhere is painting the hobby of so many men and women as it is in the United States. In Central Europe people collect stamps or play chamber music. In England, only a handful emulate that most famous of all "week-end painters," Winston Churchill, in taking up "painting as a pastime."

France has produced the largest number of "Maîtres Populaires de la Réalité" of any country; but "paintitis" as an epidemic, affecting large sections of the population, is virtually nonexistent. No matter that one of the great revolutionaries of French art, Henri Rousseau, was a humble tax collector; that Rimbert