

# 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'."

One aspect of American rugged individualism is that not all of us say the same word in the same way. Sometimes we don't even use the same name for the same object.

I was born and grew up in Philadelphia a coon's age, a blue moon, and a month of Sundays ago—when Hector was a pup. *Phillufia*, or *Philly*, which is what we kids called the city, was where the epicurean delight made with cold cuts, cheese, tomatoes, pickles, and onions stuffed into a long, hard-crustured Italian bread loaf was invented.

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 (*N'Hampsha*, 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 California, where I now live), torpedo, wedge, wedgie, and, in the deep South, a poor-boy (usually pronounced *poh-boy*).

In Philadelphia, we washed our hoagies down with soda. In New England we did it with tonic, and by that word I don't mean medicine. Soda and tonic in other parts are known as pop, soda pop, a soft drink, Coke, and quinine.

In northern New England, they take the term *milk shake* quite literally. To many residing in that little corner of the country, a milk shake consists of milk mixed with flavored syrup—and nothing more—shaken up until foamy. If you live in Rhode Island or in southern Massachusetts and you want ice cream in your milk drink, you ask for a cabinet (named after the square wooden cabinet in which the mixer was encased). If you live farther north, you order a velvet or a frappe (from the French *frapper*, "to ice").

Clear—or is it clean?—or is it plumb?—across the nation, Americans sure do talk "different."

What do you call those flat, doughy things you often eat for breakfast—battercakes, flannel cakes, flapjacks, fritters, griddle cakes, or pancakes?

Is that simple strip of grass between the street and the sidewalk a berm, boulevard, boulevard strip, city strip, devil strip, green belt, the parking, the parking strip, parkway, sidewalk plot, strip, swale, tree bank, or tree lawn?

Is the part of the highway that separates the northbound lanes from the southbound lanes the centerline, center strip, mall, medial strip, median strip, medium strip, or neutral ground?

Is it a cock horse, dandle, hicky horse, horse, horse tilt, ridy horse, seesaw, teeter, teeterboard, teetering board, teetering horse, teeter-totter, tilt, tilting board, tinter, tinter board, or tippity bounce?

Do fisherpersons employ an angledog, angleworm, baitworm, earthworm, eaceworm, fishworm, mudworm, rainworm, or redworm? Is a larger worm a dew worm, night crawler, night walker, or town worm?

Is it a crabfish, clawfish, craw, crawdab, crawdad, crawdaddy, crawfish, crawler, crayfish, creekcrab, crowfish, freshwater lobster, ghost shrimp, mudbug, spiny lobster, or yabby?

Depends where you live and who or whom it is you're talking to.

I figger, figure, guess, imagine, opine, reckon, and suspect that my being bullheaded, contrary, headstrong, muley, mulish, ornery, otsny, pigheaded, set, sot, stubborn, or utsy about this whole matter of dialects makes you sick to, in, or at your stomach.

But I assure you that, when it comes to American dialects, I'm not speaking fahdoodle, flumaddiddle, flummydiddle, or flurrididdle—translation: nonsense. I'm no all-thumbs-and-no-fingers, all-knees-and-elbows, all-left-feet, antigodding, bum-fuzzled, discombobulated, flusterated, or foozled bumpkin, clodhopper, country jake, hayseed, hick, hillbilly, hoosier, jackpine savage, mossback, mountain-boomer, pumpkin-

husker, rail-splitter, rube, sodbuster, stump farmer, swamp angel, yahoo, or yokel.

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 soldier 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 of the Ephraimites 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 pronouncing their words differently from other English speakers, but the way those words sound 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 live. 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 elections 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  
*arn*: 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 *lef*  
*rekanize*: to see  
*tarred*: exhausted  
*t’mar*: day following t’day  
*thang*: item  
*thank*: to cogitate

Any glossary of Southern speak would be incomplete without “*yawl*: a bunch of you’s.” When I visited Alexandria, Louisiana, a local pastor offered me proof that *y’all* has biblical 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 “First, 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 Southern speak. 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 *caht* 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 *Cuber* 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 *greacey*, 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.

**N**ow 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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