

All-American Dialects

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Born in 1938, Richard Lederer has been a lifelong student of language. He holds degrees from Haverford College, Harvard University, and the University of New Hampshire and for twenty-seven years taught English at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire. Anyone who has read one of his over thirty books will understand why he has been referred to as "Conan the Grammarian" and "America's wittiest verbalist." Lederer loves language and enjoys writing about its marvelous richness and about how Americans use language. He has written over thirty-five books including *Anguished English* (1987), *Crazy English* (1989), *The Play of Words* (1990), *Adventures of a Verbivore* (1994), *Nothing Risque, Nothing Gained* (1995), *The Bride of Anguished English* (2002), *A Man of My Words: Reflections on the English Language* (2003), *Word Wizard: Super Bloopers, Rich Reflections, and Other Acts of Word Magic* (2006), and *Presidential Trivia: The Feats, Fates, Families, Foibles, and Firsts of Our American Presidents* (2007). In addition to writing books, Lederer pens a weekly syndicated column called "Looking at Language" for newspapers and magazines throughout the country. He is the "Grammar Grappler" for *Writer's Digest*, the language commentator for National Public Radio, and cohost of *A Way with Words*, a weekly radio program out of San Diego, where he currently lives.

The following essay was first published in *USA Today* magazine in July 2009. Lederer discusses, using multiple examples, regional dialects or speech communities and how they differ one from another in vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Like John Steinbeck before him, Lederer fears that regional speech is rapidly disappearing. He fervently hopes that "American English does not turn into a bland, homogenized, pasteurized, assembly line product."

WRITING TO DISCOVER: What part of the country did you grow up in? Do you think of yourself as speaking English with a regional "accent"? Are you proud of the way you and your friends and neighbors speak? How do you view speakers from other parts of the United States? Do you readily recognize regional differences in the way English is spoken?

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

venturing from California to Manhattan Island, from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters, I hear America singing. We are teeming nations within a nation, a country that is like a world. We talk in melodies of infinite variety; we dance to their sundry measure and lyrics.

Midway through John Steinbeck's epic *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 do not even use the same name for the same object. I was born and grew up in Philadelphia a coon's age, a blue moon, 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-cruste 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 technique to eat one properly.

As a young man, 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 it. Yet, my travels around the country 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 down our hoagies with soda. In New England, we did it with tonic and, by that word, I do not 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 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 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 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 fishermen 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 are 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. I assure you, though, that when it comes to American dialects, I'm not speaking fahdoodle, flumadiddle, flummydiddle, or flurriddiddle—translation, nonsense. I am no all-thumbs-and-no-fingers, all-knees-and-elbows, all-left-feet, antigoddlings, bumfuzzled, 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 tells of 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 they did not 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. 10

These days, English speakers do not 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 the George Bernard Shaw play "Pygmalion," Prof. 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 U.S. 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 weird. "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, slippery substance.

It is reported that many Southerners reacted to the elections of Jimmy Carter (Georgia) and Bill Clinton (Arkansas) 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 (60 minutes); arn (ferrous metal); ass (frozen water); ast (questioned); bane (small, kidney-shaped vegetable); bar (seek and receive a loan); 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); reckonize (to see); tarred (exhausted); t'mar (the day following t'day); thang (item); thank (to cogitate); and y'all (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," before adding, "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: 15

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 of 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."

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." Those *r*'s, though, are not lost. A number of upper Northeasterners, including the famous Kennedy family of Massachusetts, add "*r*" to words, such as "idear" and "Cuber," when those words come before a vowel or at the end of a sentence.

I.D. BY SPEECH PATTERN

When an amnesia victim appeared at a truck stop in Missouri in the fall of 1987, authorities tried in vain to 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 her 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 profile accurately 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 that decade, particularly that of David Reisman. The complexity of Kaczynski's sentence structure, including the subjunctive mood, and the learned-ness 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 50s, had grown up in Chicago and lived for a time in Northern California, and was well educated, having once been a university professor.

Face facts; we all speak some sort of dialect. When you learn language, you learn it as a dialect; if you do not speak a dialect, you do not

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speak. Dialect is not a label for careless, unlettered, nonstandard speech. A dialect is not 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. Do not 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, writer John Steinbeck decided to rediscover America in a camper with his French poodle, Charlie. He reported on his observations in a book called *Travels with Charlie* and included these thoughts on 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 almost could pinpoint a man's place of origin by his speech. That is growing more difficult and, in some foreseeable future, will 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 ever have 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's trip, 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"—now, though, it is the voice of the broadcaster, with his or her immaculately groomed diction. Let us hope that American English does not turn into a bland, homogenized, pasteurized, assembly line product. May our bodacious language remain tasty and nourishing—full of flavor, variety, and local ingredients. 25