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An American Accent

WHILE Englishmen along the colonial seaboard tried to cling to the familiar local ways of the different parts of England from which they had come, they founded—without meaning to—a culture which was in many ways more homogeneous in vast America than it had been in little England. The settlers clung to their mother language, and in the course of moving about the New World and in moving up and down the social scale, they made it more uniform. A single spoken language soon echoed across the continent, overcoming space as the printed word overcomes time. The American language would fulfill the Elizabethan prophecy of Samuel Daniel written in 1599:

> And who, in time, knowes whither we may vent
> The treasure of our tongue, to what strange shores
> This gaine of our best glory shall be sent,
> T'inrich unknowing Nations with our stores?
> What worlds in th' yet unformed Occident
> May come refin'd with th' accents that are ours?

Only two centuries later when this dream had become a fact, Noah Webster foresaw that "North America will be Peopled with a hundred millions of men, *all speaking the same language*." Contrasted with Europe, America promised a "period when the people of one quarter of the

world, will be able to associate and converse together like children of the same family."

The American language has indeed shown a spectacular uniformity. Only after we have looked at polyglot nations like India, the Soviet Union, and China, or when we remind ourselves that Europe, with an area of less than four million square miles, possesses at least a dozen major languages, can we appreciate our advantage. The people of the United States, spread over three million square miles, speak only one language. There is more difference between the speech of Naples and Milan, or of Canterbury and Yorkshire, or of a Welsh coal-miner and an Oxford undergraduate, or of a Provençal peasant and a Paris lawyer than there is between the language of Maine and California, or between the speech of a factory-worker and a college president in the United States.

The linguistic uniformity of America is geographic (without barriers of regional dialect) and social (without barriers of caste and class). Both types of uniformity have had vast consequences for the national life; they have been both symptoms and causes of a striving for national unity. When we note what a large French-speaking population has meant in Canadian political life or how numerous languages have obstructed federation in India, we begin to realize how different our political life might have been without our language unity. Many other features of modern American culture—including the geographic mobility of the population, the public educational system, the mail-order catalogs, the networks of radio and television, the national mass-circulation magazines and "national advertising" (with all these have meant for the standard of living)—would have been more difficult in a nation of several languages. What would have happened to the Log-Cabin-to-the-White-House style of American politics if, as in England, a man who lacked the "proper" background betrayed himself in every word? Our common, classless language has provided the vernacular for equality in America.

The other "American" qualities of our language seem trivial beside this monumental uniformity, which can be traced back to the earliest age of English settlement. If the roots of this linguistic uniformity had not been strongly developed during the colonial period, before the numerous and motley immigrations of the 19th century, the United States might not today offer the world the paradoxical spectacle of a nation of many peoples who speak a single language. Almost from the first settlement there were pressures toward uniformity.

First, consider pronunciation. Men in areas as remote from each other as Massachusetts Bay and Virginia had brought with them the same language. They had come mostly from the same regions—London,

the Midlands, and southern England—and they represented roughly the same social classes. Although the speech differences between New England and the South even today are not great enough to make them barriers to understanding, the most remote parts of the Atlantic colonies in 17th-century America probably did not show even these small differences. New Englanders and Southerners then spoke with something like what we now call a "Southern accent." Southern pronunciation today is thus in many respects a survival of older ways and the "English" characteristics of later New England speech are apparently innovations.

Once on American shores, English speech tended to become more uniform, because of some general colonial and some peculiarly American forces. "In consequence of the frequent removals of people from one part of our country to another," John Pickering in his vocabulary of Americanisms (1816) noted "greater uniformity of dialect throughout the United States . . . than is to be found throughout England." Even before the end of the 18th century, such students of language as the Rev. John Witherspoon, who had come from Scotland to become president of Princeton, noted this fact. "The vulgar in America speak much better than the vulgar in Great-Britain," he remarked in *The Druid* (1781), "for a very obvious reason, viz. that being much more unsettled, and moving frequently from place to place, they are not so liable to local peculiarities either in accent or phraseology. There is a greater difference in dialect between one county and another in Britain, than there is between one state and another in America." The once-isolated English regional dialects met and had to speak to one another. Recent linguistic scholars have noted this tendency toward uniformity to be a general characteristic of the speech of any colony compared to that of its mother country.

America, then, in the 18th century was a melting pot, although the distinctions among the ingredients were subtler in its earliest period. In the 19th and 20th centuries such diverse elements as Irish, German, Polish, Jewish, Italian, Mexican, and Chinese were to be compounded; in the 17th and 18th centuries the immigrants came from Yorkshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, London, Kent, Hampshire, and other English counties. Anyone who looks at a map of England marked to show the places of origin of traceable 17th-century immigrants to New England and Virginia cannot fail to be impressed with their dispersion over the face of the mother-country. Although, as we have already noted, there was some tendency to concentrate (those from the Midlands in Virginia; from London and East Anglia in New England), and immigration did not yet draw heavily from the peasantry, still the earliest American

colonies included men from different social classes and from many parts of the homeland.

American life bred uniformity even within smaller areas, like New England itself. About seventy per cent of the traceable settlers of Plymouth, Watertown, Dedham, and Groton in Massachusetts during the 17th century seem to have come from London and the Eastern counties; the remainder were widely dispersed. Most important, the ruling group did not all speak a single dialect, so could not fix any particular dialect as the language of the community. The pronunciation revealed by the spelling of the semi-literate scribes of the New England towns, who had come from many parts of England, suggests a speech remarkably uniform and remarkably near the standard speech of England.

The same 18th-century travelers who noted the lack of dialects were impressed also by the proper and grammatical English spoken by Americans of all classes. In Virginia, the Rev. Hugh Jones observed in 1724, "the Planters, and even the Native Negroes generally talk good English without Idiom or Tone, and can discourse handsomly upon most common Subjects." Councillor Robert Carter preferred American-trained, rather than Scotch or English tutors for his children "on account of pronunciation in the English Language." The faculty of William & Mary College in the 18th century was especially concerned that the students learn proper pronunciation. In Philadelphia, the Scottish Lord Adam Gordon, traveling the colonies in 1764-65, found that "the propriety of Language here surprized me much, the English tongue being spoken by all ranks, in a degree of purity and perfection, surpassing any, but the polite part of London."

Some went so far as to say that the colonists "in general speak better English than the English do." Even critical observers agreed. The Rev. Jonathan Boucher (1737-1804)—who had lived in the South for about fifteen years, had taught Washington's stepson, John Parke Custis, and was a leading Loyalist in the Revolution—spent many years preparing a "Glossary of Archaic and Provincial Words." He felt that the absence of dialect in America had actually impoverished the tongue, but he still found it "extraordinary that, in North America, there prevails not only, I believe, the purest Pronunciation of the English Tongue that is anywhere to be met with, but a perfect Uniformity."

The state of American speech in the years just before the Revolution was summarized by William Eddis in his letter from America dated June 8, 1770:

> In England, almost every county is distinguished by a peculiar dialect; even different habits, and different modes of thinking, evidently discriminate inhabitants, whose local situation is not far remote: but in Maryland, and throughout adjacent provinces, it is worthy of observation, that a striking similarity of speech universally prevails; and it is strictly true, that the pronunciation of the generality of the people has an accuracy and elegance, that cannot fail of gratifying the most judicious ear.
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> The colonists are composed of adventurers, not only from every district of Great Britain and Ireland, but from almost every other European government, where the principles of liberty and commerce have operated with spirit and efficacy. Is it not, therefore, reasonable to suppose, that the English language must be greatly corrupted by such a strange intermixture of various nations? The reverse is, however, true. The language of the immediate descendants of such a promiscuous ancestry is perfectly uniform, and unadulterated; nor has it borrowed any provincial, or national accent, from its British or foreign parentage.
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> For my part, I confess myself totally at a loss to account for the apparent difference, between the colonists and persons under equal circumstances of education and fortune, resident in the mother country. This uniformity of language prevails not only on the coast, where Europeans form a considerable mass of the people, but likewise in the interior parts, where population has made but slow advances; and where opportunities seldom occur to derive any great advantages from an intercourse with intelligent strangers.

The resistance of the American language during the colonial period to borrowing and the invention of words shows the strength of the forces toward a uniform English speech. Wholesale assimilation of foreign words might have produced a semi-English patois, a pidgin English or a papiamento, like those in the Caribbean or in parts of South East Asia. But this never happened. The opportunities for the mixing of French and German into English in the colonial period were so numerous that the failure of English colonials to seize them is doubly remarkable. Few words were borrowed from German before the Revolution, despite the several German-speaking communities in Pennsylvania, in the Valley of Virginia, in Georgia, and elsewhere. It was not until after the Louisiana Purchase (1803), after the settlements across the Mississippi, and especially during and after the Mexican War (1846-48), that many words were taken from the Spanish. There were not many borrowings from the French until after the Revolution, the Louisiana Purchase, and the increasing contacts with the French along the Northwestern border; although a few important words like *portage, chowder* and *caché* were adopted very early, and *bureau* and *prairie* were adopted before the Revolution. Some of the earliest borrowings were from the Dutch, for

example, *boss* and *Yankee,* but the whole intake of Dutch words was not large.

During the colonial period probably the largest number of additions to the English language in America were of two limited classes: borrowings of Indian words and new combinations of English words. The borrowed Indian words were mostly from place-names, especially for natural features, like *Massachusetts* Bay; or they were words having to do with Indian relations, Indian life, Indian crops, or objects in Indian use, such as *hominy, toboggan, pemmican, mackinaw, moccasin, papoose, sachem, powwow, tomahawk, wigwam, succotash,* and *squaw,* all of which were circulating by mid-18th century. America's novel plants and animals incited new combinations of familiar English words, such as *bullfrog, mudhen, catbird, catfish, muskrat, razorback, gartersnake,* and *groundhog,* and American life suggested *backwoods, backstreet, backlane, backlog, backcountry,* while a number of older English words—*bluff, cliff, neck, bottoms, pond,* and *creek* acquired novel meanings to fit the American landscape. Some of these new combinations already faintly smacked of that copious and spicy enrichment of the language which was to come in the early 19th century. But before the Revolution the only strikingly new character which the English language had acquired in America was its uniformity.

The very word "Americanism," meaning an expression formed or predominantly used in America, was not known until Witherspoon employed it in 1781. Before then there was surprisingly little need for it. That brashness and extravagance, the rip-snortin' (we owe the word to Davy Crockett) lingo of the frontier and the Wild West, the flowery spread-eagle bombast of 4th-of-July orators, which all seem so American, come not from the 18th but from the 19th century. The borrowings from French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Yiddish, and the free commercial invention of words (from *Kodak* to *Sanforized*), were also products of American life in the 19th and 20th centuries—of the vast immigrations, industrialization, mass production, the mixing of peoples in great cities, and the rise of advertising, national magazines, radio and television. The vocabulary did not become distinctively American until at least a half-century after the Declaration of Independence. The expansive, vibrant, motley, adventuring spirit of Elizabethan England was to find a latter-day counterpart in the spirit of 19th-century America; the enterprising spirit of both ages was expressed in a vitality, ingenuity, and experimentalism of language. "The Elizabethan quality in American English," Krapp has observed, "is not an inheritance but a development on American soil."

American speech remained conservative, clinging to an increasingly uniform standard, during the entire colonial period. Non-English-speaking peoples tended to become quickly assimilated. The French Huguenots who sought refuge in America after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 were, for example, soon absorbed. The numerous Germans who came here in the 17th century, occasionally as whole communities, and settled in Pennsylvania and the valley of Virginia, in some instances retained a modified German dialect for use among themselves, but their language exerted negligible influence upon American English. New immigrants expecting to rise into the higher social classes which were already speaking the American language felt every incentive to learn the common language of the community. By speaking "broken English" the parents expressed their own aspirations for the common language and the hope that their children might rise in the world.