



Spring 1992

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Jim Wayne (1992) "Over the Wall: Breaking Out of Misconceptions About Standard English and Dialects," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 11 : No. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol11/iss2/3>

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Over the Wall: Breaking Out of Misconceptions About Standard English and Dialects

Jim Wayne Miller

In the July 1989 *Atlantic* Cullen Murphy contributed a short piece entitled "Breakout" about the increasingly frequent use in the Northeast of *dit'n* for *didn't*.

Murphy asked editors of dictionaries and other language experts about the usage and reported what they told him. All the specialists he talked to gave much the same answer, which Murphy summarized as follows:

Since the 1950s the South has cycled millions of her sons and daughters through the rest of America, and the rest of America has cycled millions through the South. No such exchange of people, many of them transient, has ever before taken place in the United States on quite the same scale. Naturally enough, some of the consequences have been, so to speak, pronounced.

Murphy accepts the rise of *dit'n* in the Northeast as "in some measure—in great measure—a historical accident," as the specialists suggest. But he thinks there is more to it than that. He speculates that some of the people he has recently heard saying *dit'n*—an investment banker, a corporate lawyer, a demographer, a salesman at Brooks Brothers, a radio talk-show host—are affecting the pronunciation

because they find the term curiously attractive: a way of dressing up the stolid construction *didn't* by seeming to dress down. Many of these people, I suspect, think of themselves as having no accent, and yearn for some minor discordant note to lend character to their speech.

In considering linguistic change, Murphy concludes, we should take into consideration vanity as one of the possible reasons for shifts in the way we speak.

Murphy has a point. Our language is part of our identity, like our clothes and cars, which we choose in some measure in order to make a statement about who we are. Individually and collectively we may affect "down home" or "down scale" pronunciations just as accountants and lawyers dress up as urban cowboys—as a way of projecting genuineness and authenticity. Rock singers are seldom "hungry" for love; they're "hongry" for it (thus they appropriate the "authentic" pronunciation of Black Mississippi blues singers, which is perceived as more primitive and sensual). Dressing down by appropriating the attire of the cowboy, or elements of Black speech, is evidence of what the French term *nostalgie de la boue*, literally, a longing for the mud. This longing, as Murphy suggests, is felt by people who think of themselves as having no accent, no character, or, I would add, no particular identity or authenticity—by people who suspect they are generic. They do not wish to speak generically any more than they wish to wear generic clothes or drive a generic car.

There is precedent for suspecting vanity as a source of language change. In sixteenth-century France the beautiful people, the in-crowd, began to substitute an *s* or *z* sound wherever the *r* sound occurred—perhaps to set themselves apart from ordinary people, creeps, wimps, and people who were of out it, just nowhere. The result was that they said *Pazi*, not *Paris*, and *chaise*, not *chaire*. The fad did not last, and people went back to saying *Paris*. By chance, however, *chaise* survived the fad, as faddish words and expressions occasionally do, which is half the reason why we say *chaise lounge* instead of *chaire longue*. (One other thing occurred: we confused French *longue* with *lounge*. The French called it a *chaise longue*—a "long chair"; but Americans persist in "lounge," nevertheless.)

That the South should be associated with our longing for the mud is no accident, for the South is our emotional sty, the place where we go to wallow in our sappiest pastoral idylls as well as our worst nightmares. Sometimes sunny, sometimes savage, the South has long been peculiarly attractive to non-Southern Americans (cf. Whitman's poem "O Magnet-South," which dates from 1860). So Murphy is persuasive when he suspects that the many Northeasterners affect *dit'n* "because they find the term curiously attractive. . . ."

But the South's magnetic attraction is only half the connection, for Americans are both attracted and repelled by the South. The

whole ambivalent connection is demonstrated by the curious attraction Murphy suspects, and by the disdain for the term that Murphy himself and an unnamed friend exhibit. The *dit'n* phenomenon was called to Murphy's attention by a friend who asked, "Have you noticed that people are saying *dit'n* instead of *didn't*? I don't mean people you might expect to say *dit'n*, but educated people, and people not from the South." The pronunciation is described as having "broken out" of its native habitat in the South—an expression which suggests a threatening lawlessness. People *break out* of jail. We speak of an *outbreak* of an illness. The expression suggests *dit'n* is killer bees or a dread disease. I do not think I am unfairly imputing this meaning to Murphy, for he employs the disease metaphor when he writes:

Dit'n may not yet have achieved the potency of a virus at an airport, but it is likewise a pathogen whose presence frequently goes undetected.

II

Murphy's piece is a typical causerie, not unlike those he frequently contributes to *Atlantic*. And it is not concerned so much with Southerners as it is with Northerners whom he suspects of affectation. He is quite legitimately speculating on the reasons for language change. But because he associates Southerners with uneducated people; because of the implications of the term "break out" and his comparing *dit'n* to a virus or pathogen; and, most important, because language usage (especially pronunciation) is an inherently disputatious topic about which Southerners are especially self-conscious and defensive, Murphy's essay elicited sharply worded responses.

In the October *Atlantic* Charles Roberts, who sounds as if he might be a native Southerner now living in exile in Los Gatos, California, responded with this opening salvo: "Murphy and his sources don't know what they're talking about regarding Southern speech patterns." He denies that *dit'n* is a Southernism, maintaining that the "indigenous pronunciation is *did'n*." And, so what, Roberts goes on to say, if Southerners, even educated Southerners, use "nonstandardisms"? They often do it facetiously or as a disarming device, as when they say *po* for *poor*, as in *po*

folks. Anyway, "even educated Northerners are likely to say *stomick*, *acrost*, *crick* (for *creek*), *warrantee* in confusion with *guarantee*, and other nonstandardisms, such as *heighth* for *height*. Also, Northerners say *pome* for *poem*, *fore* for *for*, the letter *r* for *our*, and *nooz* for *news*."

By this time Roberts is on a roll, so he points out the misperception of "lexicographers and fellow travelers" who think Southerners say *Ah* for *I* (they don't, they say *I* as in *island*, whereas general American pronunciation of *I* is something like *Ie* (he's *right*), while Long Island *I* is *Oi*. And, as for the pronunciation *bidness*, which somebody brought up, most Southerners, Roberts continues, say the standard *bizness*, while *bidness*, which some lexicographer characterized as generally Southern, is heard mostly in Texas. Winding down, Roberts deplores the stereotyping of all Southerners by observing: "to assume that all Southerners use it [*bidness*] is like assuming that all New Yorkers say *youse* and *ain't* and that all New Englanders speak with a Boston Irish brogue."

Another letter writer in the October *Atlantic*, A.S. Povall, Jr., identified as a native of Mississippi now living in Vienna, Virginia, does not help Charles Roberts's argument that *dit'n* is not a Southernism. Povall not only accepts *dit'n* as Southern, but suggests it has parallels in *it'n*, *wat'n*, *hat'n*, and *coult'n*.

Cullen Murphy does not comment on Povall's letter, but he does reply to Charles Roberts by saying he shares Roberts's distaste for regional stereotypes—and by thanking Roberts for helping "to dispel the stereotype of Southern affability."

III

The November 1989 *Atlantic* carries two more letters in response to Cullen Murphy's "Breakout." The first one comes from Sydonia Presser of Brooklyn, New York, who finds Murphy's explanation of the *dit'n* phenomenon inadequate, and offers her own. In the proper pronunciation, *didn't*, it is the presence of:

three alveolar stops in succession (d, n, and t are all produced by the identical positioning of the tongue against the gum ridge) that creates the problem. The need to repeat this movement so quickly demands a high degree of control

of the tongue [a degree of control relaxed Southerners don't have]. Southern speech patterns have always reflected the South's more relaxed life-styles. Those patterns include omissions of and substitutions for many sounds demanding energetic movements of the speech articulators (for example, "Ah'm" for "I'm," "comin'" for "coming").

Why then, are other Americans saying *dit'n*? The answer is not vanity, as Cullen Murphy had suggested. According to Sydonia Presser, "These substitutions and omissions fit in with a general American trend toward sloppy enunciations. Hence their 'attractiveness' and imitation."

The second response to "Breakout" in the November 1989 *Atlantic* comes from Leon Lukaszewski of Walnut Creek, California, who, like Ms. Presser, sees *dit'n* as a sign of deterioration and degeneration. Whereas Sydonia Presser sees *dit'n* as part of "a general American trend toward sloppy enunciations," Lukaszewski, more focused, sees the spread of *dit'n* as "a mere gloss on the decay of the negative in American (and English) speech." Evidence of this decay he sees in the "idiot idiom 'could care less,'" which is "working its way into acceptance from the earlier cliché 'couldn't care less'—a logical negative slurred out of existence twenty-five or thirty years ago." This decadent slurring has ominous consequences, Lukaszewski suggests: "At least one murder conviction (two, if I recall right) has been appealed on the ground that a material witness's 'I didn't see' appeared as 'I *did* see' in the trial transcript given to the jury."

IV

There is little new in all this. People have been poking fun at one another's language for as long as we have records. The word *solecism* (an ungrammatical combination of words in a sentence, a minor blunder in speech, something deviating from what is considered to be the proper or accepted order) derives from Soloi, a city in ancient Cilicia, where a form of Attic Greek considered substandard was spoken. And certainly the pronunciation of words does have consequences. Consider the example of the Hebrew word *shibboleth* (which means stream), used as a test to

distinguish Gileadites from Ephramites (who, when they pronounced the word *sibboleth*, identified themselves as the enemy—and they were dispatched).

It is very difficult to say what is correct and what is incorrect when it comes to language. Factors that have nothing to do with language play a large role, as Max Weinreich, author of the splendid *History of the Yiddish Language*, reminds us when he points out: "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy." This observation encapsulates profound truths about language change. Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese, for instance, were all once degenerate, sloppy, decayed, and, certainly, substandard variants of Latin. They were dialects. They became languages when their speakers got their own armies and navies, as it were; that is, when they became sufficiently strong militarily, economically, industrially. (The elegant French *tête-à-tête* comes from most inelegant soldier slang which likens the heads of two persons in intimate conversation to two earthen pots.)

Many people who deplore dialects and deviations from the standard often have no conception that there are, really, nothing but dialects, and, from time to time, because of historical accidents (like getting an army and a navy) one of these dialects comes to be perceived as more prestigious than others closely related and quite similar. Those people defending the correctness and superiority of the standard often have no notion of how the standard came to be considered standard, or of how riddled it is with the fossils of former decay, confusion, and sloppiness.

It was Richard Duppa (1770-1831) who correctly observed: "In language, the ignorant have prescribed laws to the learned." Our English-speaking forebears, trying to get their tongues around Norman French, prescribed that we should say *an apron* instead of *a napron*, thereby obscuring the connection between *apron* and *napkin*. These same forebears blundered into *a newt* instead of *an ewte*; *an adder* for *a natter*; *an orange* for *a noranja*. Why? Because they did not know any better. Our ignorant forebears caused *cleave* to have two opposite meanings (to split apart, and to stick together) because they sloppily collapsed two similar but separate words (*cliofan*, to split, and *clioban*, to stick)—so now we promise to cleave together—until we cleave apart! It was our inept and inattentive forebears who kept getting sounds transposed so that *drit* became *dirt* and a beautiful old word, *brid*, became ugly and illegitimate *bird*. Because they were thinking about girls, or

boys, when they should have been studying the language, English speakers a few centuries ago simply forgot that *coppe* meant spider, leaving us to wonder why a spider's web is also a *cobweb*. Yet all these deplorable mistakes are standard English.¹

Discussions of language change, speech variation, and correctness such as those in three recent issues of *Atlantic* seldom admit, or are capable of admitting, that what is correct has much to do with power and prestige, matters of social class and income, and not much at all to do with the inherent superiority of pronunciation or grammatical form. And so to this extent the deplorers of *dit'n* are fooling themselves. They do not realize, as Walt Wolfram and Donna Christian point out in their study, *Appalachian Speech*, that

Social stigma is attached to a particular language form not because of any inherent structural weakness of the form, but because of the relative social position of the speakers who use it.²

We despise the group first, then find fault with their language. (Or, as Cullen Murphy suspects, we secretly admire something about the group, and then affect their language.) In George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and the 1956 musical *My Fair Lady*, based on Shaw's play, Henry Higgins deplores Eliza Doolittle's speech first because of her social and economic standing. If their roles were reversed, and Eliza's linguistic group represented the establishment, she would be teaching Henry how to rid himself of his dreadful dialect and learn to speak proper Cockney.

In the United States our tendency to see all Southern speech as substandard has much to do with American history and American racism, and is a good example of Max Weinreich's observation that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy.³ The Union won the war. Had it not, standard American English, that is, the prestige dialect, would be based on Southern speech to a greater degree than it is.

Here is a version of *The Song of Solomon*. You may or may not not know its source.

De song of songs, dat is Solomon's.
Let him kiss me wud de kisses of his mouth; for yer love

is better than wine.

Cause of de smell of yer good intments, yer naum is lik
intment tipped out; derefore de maidens love ye. . . .

It continues:

My beloved spoke, an said to me: Git up, my love, my fair
un, an come away.

Jest a liddle while ahter I passed by em, I foun him dat my
soul loves. . . .

Most Americans today would say that this is a version from *The Song of Solomon* based on the speech of Blacks in the American South. But it is not. I take it from Cleanth Brooks's *The Language of the American South*.⁴ Brooks says he took it from a pamphlet, purchased in a London bookstall, "which purported to give the King James version of *The Song of Solomon* as it would have been spoken by a countryman or villager of Sussex, . . . a county about forty or fifty miles south of London."

Brooks's point is that "some sort of relationship must have existed between the dialects of England's southern counties and our popular Southern pronunciation even in its 'broadest' forms." I would add that when we encounter these forms without any sense of what the English language has been in the past, we make terrible mistakes. For example, we may see as a deplorable degeneration or sloppiness something that is actually a preservation of an old pronunciation, a venerable relic we would treasure if it were a shawl or a battle axe. We may consider Black speech as an inadequate attempt to speak standard English, because we are unfamiliar with the dialect or dialects from which Black speech was formed.

Certainly we are on dangerous ground when we go beyond the mere reporting or recording of a speech form and make evaluative assessments of it—as when Sydonia Presser explains *dit'n* by suggesting that Southerners lack "a high degree of control of the tongue" required by sounds "demanding energetic movements of the speech articulators. . . ." That all sounds as if it might be quite scientific, but there is no scientific basis for such simplistic evaluations. One can infer nothing about the disposition or character of individuals or groups by extrapolating from miscellaneous speech forms.

What we do know about dialects is what they are not:

1. Dialects are not crude approximations of a perfect and unchanging standard language.
2. Dialects are not mixed-up, haphazard, unpatterned uses of language (at least, not any more mixed up, haphazard, and unpatterned than a standard language).
3. Dialects do not keep people from thinking logically; hence, dialect speakers are not necessarily slow learners.

As an illustration, George Washington Harris, author of *The Sut Lovingood Tales*, shows that you can say smart things or dumb things in dialect. Here is Sut Lovingood, the central character in the tales, a lanky Tennessee mountaineer, talking to his creator, Harris, and worrying about his speech—when a stranger butts in:

“Now why the devil can’t I ‘splain myself like yu? I ladles out my words at randum, like a calf kickin at yaller-jackids; yu jis’ rolls em out tu the pint, like a feller a-layin bricks—every one fits. How is it that bricks fits so clost enyhow? Rocks won’t ni du hit?”

“Becaze they’s e all ove a size,” ventured a man with a wen over his eye.

“The devil yu say, horny-head! Haint reapin-mercheens ove a size? I’d like tu see two ove em fit clost. Yu wait until yu sprouts tuther horn, afore yu venters to ‘splain mix’d questions.”

Both men speak a dialect of English. The fellow with the knot on his forehead, however, is illogical, while Sut scores a logical bull’s-eye.

Just as it is possible to say smart things in a dialect, it is possible to say dumb things in standard American English. For instance:

—A radio announcer informs us that “the snow has let up to almost non-existence status,” or that “a chemical preservative may cause cancer in bacon.”

—A politician running for re-election declares: “My record stands on itself!” Or he admits: “There are pros and cons on

both sides of the question."

—A Kentucky basketball coach observes: "Most of our future lies ahead of us."

—Nancy Reagan says: "I believe that people would be alive today if there were a death penalty."

These statements are all in perfectly standard English, but they clearly need work!

V

Language variation, dialects, how we think about them and react to them—all these things, funny and trivial as they may sometimes be—are finally important (and we should sprout our other horn before we venture to explain "mixed questions" pertaining to these topics). Language variation and dialects are important beyond the consequences substandard or dialect usage may have for the transcript of a murder trial in which "did see" and "didn't see" are confused. It matters that we not have misconceptions about dialect such as the ones outlined here, for those misconceptions tend to disqualify the speech of various groups. Once this is done, it is a short step to thinking of the people associated with that speech as illegitimate—and subhuman. Then we can appropriate their property, dump toxic waste in their water, justify providing them less than adequate roads and schools, and deny them access to justice and medical services. To rob people, in whatever way, of their language—and to disqualify their language is one way of doing it—is to rob people of their humanity, for our language is what makes us specifically human.

The connection between language and power is nowhere made more clear than in a poem by the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam. This poem, which may have led to his arrest, deportation, and eventual death (he was arrested in May 1934 and never returned from Stalin's prison camps) is in a translation by Robert Lowell included in George Steiner's *Extra-territorial*. Here is an illustrative passage:

His thick fingers are fat as worms,
His words reliable as ten-pound weights.

His boot tops shine,
His cockroach mustache is laughing.

About him, the great, his thick-necked, drained advisors.
He plays with them. He is happy with half-men around him.

They make touching and funny animal sounds.
He alone talks Russian.

To have one's language disqualified is to have the ground pulled from underfoot; is to have no one hear you, though they are ten feet away. When a group's language is taken, its members are made "half-men" who make "funny animal sounds" while someone else speaks real language, someone whose words have heft, like ten-pound weights, like horseshoes. Steiner speaks of the decline of people into abject, comic animality when speech is denied them.

In that phrase "comic animality" we have a clue to what has happened as the result of the disqualification of Southern speech (which has taken place as a result of unequal power-relations between North and South, and not as the result of any inferiority of the speech). After the Civil War, Southerners emerge in American writing as clowns and comic characters who live at the level of instinct; they can be bozos but seldom heroes. And if they are not comic, they are most often savage (as in James Dickey's *Deliverance*). Comic animality or savage animality. Southerners as a group, both lowland and upland Southerners, with respect to national myth and ideology, have been caught up in a pattern which, according to Rodger Cunningham in "Eat Grits and Die: or, Cracker, Your Bread Ain't Hermeneutical," amounts to

exactly that constellation of qualities which the powerful have attributed to the powerless throughout recorded history in order to soothe their own consciences and justify unequal conditions. [They are thought to be] dirty, ignorant, improvident, violent, hard-drinking, sexually loose, unprogressive. Of course they're also fun-loving, hospitable, and possessed of a rich oral culture. . . .⁵

Here are both sides of the ambivalent construct I suggest informs Murphy's "Breakout" and which allows him to view *dit'n* with some alarm at the same time that his fellow Northeasterners

find it "curiously attractive."

But it is a brutal and dehumanizing bind in which to place people of any group, and to the extent we can keep from it, we ought not to participate in stigmatizing the language of any group. Rather than worry about the decline of language as a result of sloppiness and ignorance (sloppiness and ignorance built the language), we ought to be concerned with the decline of people into abject, comic animality when they are denied their language. Rather than worrying that some substandard pronunciation has "broken out" of its native habitat and threatens to infect us as if an outbreak of a virus, we ought to attempt to break out of whatever misconceptions we have about language and language variation.

No one, anywhere, ought to have to feel ashamed of the speech of his or her community. Here's what Kurt Vonnegut, the novelist, has to say on the subject:

The writing style which is most natural for you is bound to echo the speech you heard when a child. English was the novelist Joseph Conrad's third language, and much that seems piquant in his use of English was no doubt colored by his first language, which was Polish. And lucky indeed is the writer who has grown up in Ireland, for the English spoken there is so amusing and lyrical. I myself grew up in Indianapolis, where common speech sounds like a band saw cutting galvanized tin, and employs a vocabulary as unornamental as a monkey wrench.

In some of the more remote hollows of Appalachia, children still grow up hearing songs and locutions of Elizabethan times. Yes, and many Americans grow up hearing a language other than English, or an English dialect a majority of Americans cannot understand.⁶

Is it possible to be serious, even dignified, and yet have the language of one's immediate speech community show in one's speech or writing? I think so. Here is a passage from a letter written in 1915 by William Creech, Sr., of Pine Mountain, Kentucky. He explains why he has given his land to a school, and expresses his hopes for the children of the Kentucky mountains:

I don't look after wealth for them. I look after the prosperity

of our nation. I want all younguns taught to serve the livin God. Of course, they won't all do that, but they can have good and evil laid before them and they can choose which they will. I have heart and cravin that our people may grow better. I have deeded my land to the Pine Mountain Settlement School to be used for school purposes as long as the Constitution of the United State stands. Hopin it may make a bright and intelligent people after I'm dead and gone.

The language of William Creech's immediate speech community certainly makes itself heard when he writes (I don't look after wealth for them—I want all younguns taught—I have heart and cravin). It is the language of his home, land beneath his feet, and he is comfortable standing there—which is essentially what Kurt Vonnegut recommends. I do not think it inappropriate to set against Vonnegut's statement, and Creech's expression of hopes for posterity, those lines from "Little Gidding" in which T. S. Eliot says our language is effective

. . . where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together.

NOTES

¹Robert Hendrickson, *Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1987).

²Walt Wolfram and Donna Christian, *Appalachian Speech* (Arlington, Virginia: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1976), p.4.

³Robert Byrne, *1,911 Best Things Anybody Ever Said* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1988), p. 259.

⁴Cleanth Brooks, *The Language of the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), pp. 8-9.

⁵Rodger Cunningham, "Eat Grits and Die; or, Cracker, Your Bread Ain't Hermeneutical," *Appalachian Journal* 17 (Winter 1990): 178.

⁶Billings S. Fuess, Jr., *How to Use the Power of the Printed Word* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), pp. 35-36.