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THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH DIALECT STUDIES

By G. L. BROOK

The most valuable kind of research is that which opens up new fields for future investigators. It therefore occurred to me that in a volume of studies presented to Harold Orton, room might be found for an article discussing the direction that English dialect studies might take after the completion of the Survey of English Dialects.

The first necessity is to complete the publication of the material brought together by the Survey, both in the volumes of basic material and in a dialect atlas. The speed with which one volume of Basic Material is following another is welcome evidence that this important part of the work is not likely to be neglected.

One task that needs to be undertaken will not become clear until most of the material of the Survey is published. This is the selection of certain areas in various parts of the country for a closer survey. The areas that are most likely to yield interesting results are the borders between different dialect areas, where a number of isoglosses appear to be bunched together. Investigation of such areas may make it possible to delineate dialect boundaries more exactly. If it should be found that greater precision is not possible, that very discovery will be a useful one. An investigation of border areas will yield a good deal of information about the nature of dialect boundaries. To indicate the boundary between two dialects by a line on a map is always an over-simplification; a belt where the forms characteristic of both dialects will be found is likely to be nearer to the truth. The study of border regions can indicate the varying width of such a belt. It can indicate which of two conflicting forms is, in Mendelian terms, dominant and which recessive, and it can suggest reasons for the facts that emerge.

One result of such an investigation will be to show how complicated is the dialectal situation in most parts of England today. The exact localization of a dialect speaker on the basis of an utterance of a few words has always appealed to the lay mind, and popular interest in dialect often takes the form of inviting anyone who has written on the subject to take part in a sort of parlour game to imitate the success of Professor Higgins of *Pygmalion* in such identification. Such localization

is becoming increasingly difficult, but I do not think that the difficulty should be regarded with despair by anyone who proposes to devote his life to the study of English dialects; it should rather be regarded as a challenge, which adds to the difficulty, but also to the interest, of dialect study.

During the last few decades there has been a shift of interest in linguistic studies from diachronic to synchronic study. The time has come when we should no longer reject informants on the grounds that they do not speak a "pure" dialect. Most dialect speakers today are bilingual or multilingual. We should now try to distinguish the various strands that make up the complicated pattern in the dialect of such speakers, and, in doing so, we should make use of the work of the pioneers who have written monographs on the dialect of particular villages. Of course, when we have studied the speech of an informant with a complicated history, we must not claim that we have made a study of the dialect of the place where he happens to live; we shall have studied an idiolect, and it is to be hoped that from a series of such studies of idiolects, general patterns will emerge that will throw light on the speech-habits of multilingual speakers.

The Survey of English Dialects was chiefly concerned with the speech of farmers of the age of sixty or more,¹ and there were good reasons for this approach. When the study of English dialects was revived in the nineteenth century, one of the most telling arguments to enlist support took the form of saying that in a few years it would be too late to study the older forms of English rural dialects because improved communications and other influences were rapidly reducing the number of dialect speakers. Since that time the standardizing influences have become stronger, and there is no doubt that every year that passes reduces the number of reliable informants whose speech can most easily be traced back to Middle English. We have reason to be grateful for a survey that preserves many samples of such dialects, but it is well to remember that the older rural dialects are not the only forms of speech that are worthy of study. Helge Kökeritz, in his *The Phonology of the Suffolk Dialect* (1932) chose an area under strong outside influence from London and he made it clear that he was concerned with the dialect as a whole:

My intention has been to paint a true and faithful picture of the Suffolk dialect as now spoken, not to give an idealized and beautifully retouched photograph of the speech habits of very old people to the exclusion of those of the younger generation.

(p. xiii)

The process of change from the older to the newer forms of dialect is itself a worth-while subject of study. How far is it possible to detect differences between the speech of older and younger members of the same community? The differences are not merely in pronunciation. How often have we heard an argument between people of different ages end with the despairing words "It's no use. We just don't speak the same language."

Once we get away from the idea that the only dialects worthy of serious study are those spoken by elderly country-dwellers, town dialects can begin to come into their own. Such dialects have in the past been neglected, largely, no doubt, because of the difficulties that they present and because they throw less light than do country dialects on the history of the English language.

The chief problem in the study of town dialects is their lack of homogeneity. Speakers of many different country dialects move into the same town, and the preservation of native dialects is less likely to be encouraged or tolerated. Dialect workers in the past have gone out of their way to choose informants whose speech was consistent, although such speakers form only a minute proportion of the population of the country as a whole. Perhaps the time has come when we should brace ourselves to study the language of those whose speech is inconsistent. Linguistic variations in towns depend on occupation or social class rather than on place of birth, and the study of town dialects is likely to develop side by side with the study of class dialects.

Different methods of investigation are appropriate to different aspects of dialect study. In the nineteenth century, when interest was mainly directed to vocabulary, postal questionnaires could be used, since the task of reporting whether a particular word was in use in a particular place does not call for a very high level of technical competence. The authors of dialect monographs published during the present century have been chiefly concerned with phonology, and for such investigations trained field-workers, able to distinguish subtle variations of pronunciation, are essential. The branches of study that have been neglected are those that cannot easily be studied by means of a questionnaire: syntax, intonation, and idiom. These may be expected to engage more attention in future, and the most valuable tool for their study will be the tape-recording machine.

Now that some of the more urgent tasks of English dialectology have been achieved, we have the opportunity to turn again to some of the tasks that engaged the attention of the pioneers of English dialect studies in the hope of revising their work. Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* (1898-1905) was an outstanding achievement, but

inevitably workers in more specialized fields have discovered supplementary material. The book was out of print for many years. The unrevised reprint of 1962 is better than nothing, but a thoroughly revised edition would be better still. The *English Dialect Grammar* (1905) is a less satisfactory work than the *Dictionary*, and it could with advantage be replaced by an entirely new work, making use of the material recorded in the Survey of English Dialects.

One activity that should be encouraged is the closing of the gap between those who speak dialects and those who study them. Dialect societies can do much to close the gap, but among the members of dialect societies it is possible to distinguish the two groups, who do not always mix very well. Advocates of the use of dialect often plead with speakers of standard English for tolerance of the various non-standard English dialects; it is sometimes necessary to plead with dialect speakers to be tolerant of the use of standard English. Dialect societies have sometimes lost members indignant because the proceedings were not conducted throughout in dialect, and speakers of one of the dialects of Yorkshire or Lancashire have been known to pour scorn on other dialects of those counties on the grounds that they were not "proper dialect."

Preservation of dialects is not a satisfactory substitute for their study, but it is a useful aid to such study. Much has already been done, not least at Leeds, where the co-operation of the B.B.C. has been most valuable, but much remains to be done in the systematic recording of dialects on tape and gramophone records. There is a need, too, for the selective preservation of dialect literature and for the compilation of bibliographies. Much that has been printed is not worth reprinting, but there is room for many more county anthologies on the lines of W. J. Halliday and A. S. Umpleby, *The White Rose Garland of Yorkshire Dialect Verse and Local and Folk-lore Rhymes* (Dent, 1949) and May Yates, *A Lancashire Anthology* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1923). The bibliography included in Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* is still useful, but it badly needs bringing up to date. Much dialect literature was issued at very low prices by publishers who were not fussy about bibliographical details such as dates of publication. There is scope for bibliographical studies of some of the more important dialect works, such as *Tim Bobbin*. Most dialect literature is out of print, but the spread of xerox reproduction offers possibilities, since many rare works are quite short and can therefore be made available to students cheaply.

The English Dialect Society, which has been defunct for more than sixty years, included among its aims the reprinting of rare dialect works, and county societies might well take over this task, as the Yorkshire Dialect Society has done.

The study of class dialects is much more difficult than the study of regional dialects. It is easier to determine a man's place of birth than his social class, and a field-worker studying class dialects is more likely than a regional dialect field-worker to be asked what the blazes it has to do with him. Techniques of investigation that have first of all been tried out in the study of fairly homogeneous rural dialects have worked well, and they can now be adapted to the study of much more complicated speech-situations. In this adaptation it will be necessary to enlist the help of both statisticians and sociologists to find out which sampling procedure is most appropriate in the choice of informants. The help of sociologists will be valuable also in the provision of objective criteria for distinguishing between one social class and another and in the introduction of the necessary rigour in methods of research. In the study of class dialects it is not enough to follow the example of the students of the older regional dialects in choosing a few good informants to represent each dialect and disregarding the rest of the population. The need for greater rigour and realism in the study of class dialects is illustrated by the discussion of the subject which became popular a few years ago, a discussion based on the assumption that there were two dialects, the U and the non-U. This is as though a student of regional dialects were to be content to classify linguistic usage as either "Yorkshire" or "non-Yorkshire." There are many varieties of upper-class English and the number of non-upper-class dialects is larger still.

There are objections to the use of terms like "upper" and "lower" at all in the study of class dialects, since they involve value judgements that interfere with complete objectivity, and the division between one class dialect and another need not necessarily be horizontal; it may be vertical. An important group of dialects which may cut across generally accepted class distinctions is the group of occupational dialects. Occupation is one of the most important strands that go to make social class, but occupation can exert its own influence on speech. One has only to think of the musical voices and clear enunciation of many Anglican clergymen, who have allowed the practice of intoning to influence their everyday speech, the clipped speech of the army officer, or the methodical but monotonous speech of the policeman accustomed to give evidence in a court of law.

There are other groups which have distinctive speech-habits: men and women and the various age-groups. So far as the quality of the voice is concerned, phoneticians may be able to analyse the qualities of a voice that enable a listener to say that the speaker is young or old or even to identify the speaker without seeing him. Differences in vocabulary or idiom present special difficulties because they are so

easily borrowed, and there is room for a good deal of difference of opinion. Observation is often prompted by hostility. Women have said that men are fond of pompous phrases used with little meaning like "by and large"; men have said that women are fond of using adjectives like "extraordinary" or verbs like "cope" on trivial occasions, or of saying "honestly" in isolation rather than as part of a sentence. The best indication that a phrase is to be identified with a particular group is the sense of uneasiness that one experiences on hearing it used by a member of a different group. Questions of this kind need to be removed from the realm of subjective impression into the realm of ascertained facts.

The chief problem in the study of speech arises from the transitory nature of the utterance. In the study of colloquial English the very proper demand for documentation has sometimes distorted the evidence, in that conclusions about colloquial speech have been based on written evidence, since that was the only kind that could be quoted. Speeches in novels and plays cannot be accepted as evidence of colloquial speech as it really is any more than their plots can be regarded as unedited transcripts of life. Even the most realistic of dramatists must sometimes tighten up the dialogue; and he would be to blame if he did not. Just how much most conversation stands in need of tightening up can be appreciated if one listens to a tape-recording of one's own conversation. The tape-recording machine offers great possibilities to the student of colloquial English, especially now that it has become so well known that it no longer inhibits conversation quite so much as it did when it was first used.

The detailed examination of a large collection of recorded material is one of the chief needs for the study of spoken English. Such an examination has been undertaken as part of the Survey of English Usage which is being conducted at University College, London, under the direction of Professor Randolph Quirk, and its results are awaited with interest.² This Survey is concerned with "educated" English and no account is taken of dialect or sub-standard usage; but the methods used in the Survey may profitably be applied to varieties of English other than those that can be described as "educated," and an extension of the inquiry might throw light on such questions as the proportion of speakers of English who speak "educated" English and the differences between "educated" and "uneducated" English. The great advantage of the Survey is that it will examine all the grammatical data in fairly long continuous passages instead of picking out the things that seem interesting. The latter method has frequently been employed in the past, and it has the effect of concentrating attention on unusual

features just because these are most likely to attract the attention of an investigator.

Those who fear that dialect studies are like mines which have yielded precious metals in the past but which are now nearly worked out may derive some reassurance by reflecting on the enormous field, hitherto almost untouched, presented by the study of idiolects. These are worthy of study both for their own sake and as a prelude to the study of dialects. Just as the study of dialects enables us to test the validity of generalizations about a language by presenting us with a smaller and more manageable body of material, so the study of idiolects enables us to achieve even greater precision. The pursuit of precision does not end when we have narrowed down the field of linguistic study from the millions who speak English to a single individual. One thing that makes the study of idiolects both interesting and important is that there are apparent inconsistencies in the speech of every individual. These may result from the speaker's life-history. If he has been used to hearing *bath* pronounced with a short vowel at home and with a long vowel at school, he may use the two pronunciations indiscriminately, but there is always the possibility that more careful observation will show that his use of the two pronunciations is less indiscriminate than it seems at first. He may use the short vowel on informal occasions or when he is at home with his family, while keeping the long vowel for use on more formal occasions. Observations of such differences leads to the study of what we are learning to call registers,³ or varieties of language which can be associated not with a particular group of speakers but with a particular kind of occasion. Such varieties have been called situational dialects, while some writers on dialect might refuse to regard them as dialects at all; but, by whatever name they are called, such varieties have considerable linguistic and educational importance and, in studying them, philologists have done little more than scratch the surface. Their educational importance becomes clear when we recollect that a foreigner's imperfect command of English is often revealed by his achieving an unsuitable degree of informality, and English children, learning their native language, are confronted by similar problems. The best way to study a dialect is to begin by studying a large number of idiolects, and the best way of studying registers is to begin by recording the linguistic reactions of a large number of individuals to particular situations in order to find out whether any general trends can be discovered. It has been suggested that a research worker, cunningly concealed in a tobacconist's shop, might record the different ways in which customers ask for a packet of twenty cigarettes. Some sceptics might wonder whether the value of the results would be

likely to justify the expenditure of time required by such methods of investigation, but there is no doubt that there is much interesting information waiting to be collected. A less expensive method of collecting information is by the once-popular practice of "mass observation," by which amateur field-workers are encouraged to report their observations on specific points. Such methods are less reliable than the employment of trained field-workers but, when the number of reports is very large, they can be used to confirm one another. Moreover, to encourage observers to become alert to linguistic variations has an educational value quite apart from the value of the material collected. A glance at the correspondence column of a newspaper when linguistic matters are under discussion provides ample evidence of the need for such education. Professor Quirk has suggested that "one should aim at seeing educated usage as far as possible against the background of educated *reaction* to usage," and he goes on to make a threefold distinction between what a man says, what he thinks that he says and what he thinks that he ought to say.⁴ There would be obvious advantages if these three ways of regarding any utterance could be brought more closely together, and to encourage the habit of listening carefully to what is actually said is one way of achieving this aim.

In his article, "A New Survey of English Dialects,"⁵ Eugen Dieth sought to find an explanation for what he regarded as the puzzling behaviour of Joseph Wright, who did not continue to write major works on dialect after writing *The Dialect of Windhill*, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, and *The English Dialect Grammar*. This is ungrateful: the remarkable thing about Wright is that one man should have achieved so much rather than that he should have turned to other philological studies after producing three pioneer works, one of them a stupendous achievement. In suggesting the lines on which English dialect studies may develop in the future, I have been careful not to suggest that all the work should necessarily be done by Professor Orton and his close associates. If I had done so, I should have invited the reply that Dr Johnson is said to have made to an admirer who suggested that, having completed his *Lives of the English Poets*, he should write *The Lives of the English Prose Writers*: "Sit down, sir!"

NOTES

- ¹ Harold Orton, "A New Survey of Dialect English," *Journal of the Lancashire Dialect Society*, II (1952), 6.
- ² Randolph Quirk, "Towards a Description of English Usage," *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1960), 40-61.
- ³ P. Strevens, *Papers in Language and Language Teaching* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 83 ff.
- ⁴ *Op. cit.*, 60.
- ⁵ *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, XXXII (1946), 74-104.