



## Literate and Illiterate Speech

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*American Speech*, Vol. 2, No. 10. (Jul., 1927), pp. 432-439.

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*American Speech* is currently published by Duke University Press.

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## LITERATE AND ILLITERATE SPEECH

### I

LITERATE and illiterate speech in a language like English are plainly different. We find it easy, aside from occasional points of detail, to judge of "incorrect" or "faulty" locutions, "bad grammar," "mispronunciation," and the like. This, in fact, is the layman's chief interest in linguistics.

When we try, however, to define what we mean by these judgments, to state the causes of "mistakes," or to set up a standard, we run into great difficulties. The popular explanation of these matters is certainly wrong; scientific students of language have dealt little with them explicitly, somewhat more by implication, and never in a satisfactory way. In this paper I shall give some facts from a speech-community where conditions differ from ours to so great an extent as to provide a kind of check, and shall try to draw conclusions; I may say at the outset that these conclusions are neither decisive nor complete enough to be satisfactory.

### II

The popular explanation of "correct" and "incorrect" speech reduces the matter to one of knowledge versus ignorance. There is such a thing as correct English. An ignorant person does not know the correct forms; therefore he cannot help using incorrect ones. In the process of education one learns the correct forms and, by practice and an effort of will ("careful speaking"), acquires the habit of using them. If one associates with ignorant speakers, or relaxes the effort of will

("careless speaking"), one will lapse into the incorrect forms.

It would be easy, but would require much space, to show that these notions do not correspond to the facts. There is no fixed standard of "correct" English; one need only recall that no two persons speak alike, and that, take it as a whole, every language is constantly changing. At the time when we learn to speak we are all ignorant babies, yet many children of five or six years speak "correct" English. Even some ignorant adults speak "good" English; on the other hand, there are highly educated people, even teachers and professors, who speak "bad" English. All speaking, good or bad, is careless; only for a few minutes at a time can one speak "carefully," and when one does so, the result is by no means pleasing. In fatiguing effect and in ungracefulness, "careful" speaking is like walking a chalk-line or a tight-rope.

If we leave aside all this, there is one error in the popular view which is of special interest. The incorrect forms cannot be the result of ignorance or carelessness, for they are by no means haphazard, but, on the contrary, very stable. For instance, if a person is so ignorant as not to know how to say *I see it* in past time, we might expect him to use all kinds of chance forms, and, especially, to resort to easily formed locutions, such as *I did see it*, or to the addition of the regular past-time suffix: *I seed it*. But instead, these ignorant people quite consistently say *I seen it*. Now, it is evident that one fixed and consistent form will be no more difficult than another: a

person who has learned *I seen* as the past of *I see* has learned just as much as one who says *I saw*. He has simply learned something different. Although most of the people who say *I seen* are ignorant, their ignorance does not account for this form of speech. On the other hand, I once knew a school-teacher who, when she spoke carefully, sometimes said *I have saw it*; in normal speech she said *I have seen it*. In short, what we find is not well-informed and regulated activity opposed to ignorant and careless, but rather a conflict of definite, fixed locutions, one of which, for some reason, is "good," while the others are "bad."

Mistaken as are the popular notions on this subject, they are interesting because they throw some light on our attitude to language. The popular explanation of incorrect language is simply the explanation of incorrect *writing*, taken over, part and parcel, to serve as an explanation of incorrect speech. It is the writing of every word for which a single form is fixed and all others are obviously wrong. It is the spelling of words that ignorant people, or better, unlettered people, do not know. It is writing that may be done carefully or carelessly, with evident results as to correctness. With all this it accords that popular comment on a wrong form of speech is often given in terms that properly apply to writing, not to speech; for instance, he who says *git* instead of *get*, or *ketch* instead of *catch*, is popularly said to be substituting one letter for another, to be mistaking the *spelling* of the word. In sum, the popular ideas about language apply very well to writing, but are irrelevant to speech.

Now, writing, of course, is merely a record of speech. Making this record is an activity very different from the activity of speaking. This is especially striking among us, since our writing is not entirely

parallel with speech, but contains numbers of such spellings as *go: throw: sew: beau: though*, where different spellings represent one sound-type, and such as *though: through: bough: cough: rough*, where one spelling represents different sound-types. Writing, like telegraphy or shorthand, is an activity that deals with language, but it is quite different, far less practised and ingrained, far more superficial in our make-up, than speech. Until quite recently only very few people knew how to read and write; even today many peoples do not write their language. Writing is based on speech, not speech on writing.

The fact that almost anyone except a professed student of language explains matters of speech by statements which really apply only to writing, is of great psychological interest. In infancy, when we learned to speak, we necessarily had no words with which to describe what we were doing. After we had learned to speak, we had no occasion to acquire such words or to make such a description. Consequently, as adults, we cannot state what we do when we talk: we are unconscious of the movements we make with our tongue or vocal chords, of the sound-pattern or the grammatical structure of our speech.<sup>1</sup> Writing, on the other hand, we learned after we knew how to speak; in fact, we learned it through the medium of speech. The teacher told us, in words, what to do, and trained us to state it; we learned the names of the letters, and to spell words, that is, to state which letters we use for a given word. Consequently, ever after, we are able to

<sup>1</sup> This appears in the difficulty with which school-children learn the few and fairly superficial facts of English grammar that have found a place in the school curriculum. To give anything like a full description of even his native language is a difficult undertaking for any linguist.

describe what we do when we write: we are conscious of our movements in writing, and of the forms and succession of the letters. It is on the basis of such contrasts that some psychologists make out a very good case for the view that a "conscious" action is simply one which we are able to describe in words. Whether one accepts this view or not, it is easy to see why a normal person, when asked to explain something about language, really talks about writing; to see why it took generations of students to develop a set of technical terms about speech, and why it now takes a long time to learn the use of these terms, in case one wants to enter upon the scientific study of language.

### III

The popular view of "good" and "bad" English has led us a good way round and has shown us some interesting outlooks, but it has brought us back to where we started. The scientific view, though not satisfactory, will bring us farther. It has the advantage of being based on a more extensive survey of various languages and of their history than any one person could make; also it has the advantage of a methodical approach. This last means that we shall not operate with the terms "good" and "bad" language, or their equivalents, since it is precisely these which we are trying to define.

We observe, to begin with, that in every group of people, savage or civilized, ignorant or educated, the infants learn, by imitation, the speech-habits of the older people round them. Even the child learning to speak does not use haphazard forms: he approaches more and more closely the forms used by his elders, and finally talks just like them. Speech defects after early childhood are individual abnormalities; aside from these, the

individual's peculiarities of speech are minute. Through the rest of his life he seems to speak uniformly, so far as an observer could note.

History, however, shows that there is a constant and gradual, imperceptibly slow, change in the language of every community. This change is uniform within a group of people who are constantly talking with one another, say, within a single village. But where communication is less frequent, the changes are sure to be different. For instance, if people of the same speech settle so as to form two mountain villages, with a big valley between, then, in a few generations, different changes will have taken place in the two groups. In time they may find it hard to understand each other when they meet; if they stay apart long enough, they may finally be speaking mutually unintelligible languages. When some of the Angles and Saxons left the Continent in the fifth century A.D., they spoke the same language as the less enterprising members of their tribes who stayed at home. Since then, however, both the language of the emigrants and that of the stay-at-homes have changed, and, since there has necessarily been little communication across the North Sea, they have changed in different ways, until today an Englishman and a Dutchman or a North German do not understand each other's speech. In this way, wherever there are lines across which communication is hampered,—water, mountains, deserts, political boundaries, and the like,—we find differences of speech, even though history may tell us that once upon a time, say, at the original settlement, there was uniformity.

Now, as civilization progresses, the population grows denser, means of communication improve, and petty political boundaries lose their importance. More

and more often people from different parts of the country, speaking different local dialects, have occasion to converse with each other. They soon learn, on these occasions, to avoid forms of speech that are misleading or unintelligible to the other fellow. Usually, too, there is some city which serves as a center for the larger activities of the nation. The contact of persons from different regions occurs more in this city than elsewhere; the provincial has more occasion to speak with natives of this city than with speakers of any one other dialect. In the history of English, London played this part. Thus there arises a *Standard Language* of more or less definite form. Finally, civilization leads to the widespread use of writing. Since writing is a very deliberate activity, it is easy to adapt one's writing to the requirements of wider communication: one avoids provincialisms and, if there is a metropolis, imitates the writing of the city. Thus it happens that the *Standard Language* is most definite and best observed in its written form, the *Literary Language*. The next step is popular education: children are taught in schools to write and, if possible, to speak in the forms of the Standard Language.

It is at this point that the science of language gives its explanation, if I understand it aright, of "good" and "bad" language. The child, growing up in the province, say, in some mountain village, learns to speak in the local dialect. In time, to be sure, this local dialect will take in more and more forms from the standard language, but so far in the history of mankind complete standardization seems nowhere to have taken place. The child, then, does not speak the standard language as its native tongue. It is only when he reaches school, long after his speech-habits are formed, that he is taught the standard

language. No language is like the native speech that one learned at one's mother's knee; no one is ever perfectly sure in a language afterward acquired. "Mistakes" in language are simply dialect forms carried into the standard language. The "bad" English for *I saw it* is not any haphazard error, but the perfectly fixed and definite form, *I seen it*, the form used in most American dialects of English. So far as age is concerned, *Do you want out?* is more respectable than *Do you want to go out?*—but the latter happens to be the form of Standard English: questions of age, of logical or esthetic value, or even of consistency within the system of the language are irrelevant. Dialect forms in the standard language are "bad."

Since only part of the population lives in the metropolis (when there is one, as in England), and since, even there, different social classes communicate little, and since the standard language, closely tied up with the literary language, tends to become archaic (that is, to ignore the changes of the last generations), it results that only relatively few children speak Standard Language as their real mother tongue. Almost everybody's standard speech will show dialect coloring and occasional lapses into dialect.

Sometimes a large dialect group will re-assert itself; thus, an Englishman will say that all Americans speak bad Standard English (that is, dialectally colored Standard), but we, finding the British standard too unlike our native forms, have developed a standard of our own, which deviates decidedly in pronunciation and to some extent in word-forms and constructions. The situation is all the more complicated in that we have no one center, like London. But, with the literary language in its usual function as a kind of guide to the standard speech, we have worked out in practice a fairly

definite American standard, and are able, except for small details, to agree on what is and what is not "good,"—that is, Standard,—American English.

Beside mixing dialect into standard speech, we are likely to distort the latter in some other ways. Native speakers of dialect are prone, once in a while, to speak carefully, that is, to worry about their speech, and go too far in substituting school forms for native forms. A person whose native speech says *I see: I seen: I have seen*, after learning in school to say *I saw*, may occasionally go too far in substituting *saw's* for *seen's* and say *I have saw it*,—a "hyper-urban" form. Knowing that the standard language is close to the written form, we are likely to go too far in guiding ourselves by the latter, for instance, to pronounce a t-sound in *often*,—"spelling-pronunciation." Or again, many words common in writing are rare in speech; when, for once, we speak them, we may violate the habit of those who know the spoken form. Sometimes the spoken tradition of a fairly rare word in this way dies out: *author, Gothic* used to be pronounced *autor, Gotic*; the th-sound is due to lapse of the oral tradition.

These details could be elaborated, but in the main the scientific diagnosis of "bad" language seems to be: standard language with dialect features. In the local dialect one native speaker would thus be as good as another, and "mistakes" or "bad" forms impossible.

## IV

According to the scientists' view of the matter, then, a small community of people speaking a uniform language, and above all, a community without schools or writing, would not distinguish "good" and "bad" language. When I first studied such a community, I found, to my great surprise, that these distinctions

were made, if perhaps less frequently than among us.

The Menomini Indians of Wisconsin, a compact tribe of some 1700 people, speak a language without dialectal differences and have no writing. Yet the Menomini will say that one person speaks well and another badly, that such-and-such a form of speech is incorrect and sounds bad, and another too much like a shaman's preaching or archaic ("the way the old, old people talked").

To a surprisingly large extent, considering how slight my acquaintance with their language, I was able to share in these judgments of the Menomini. A foreigner who recorded English as though it were an unwritten language, might obtain several forms of a locution, as, for instance,

You'd better do that;  
You had better do that;  
You would better do that;  
You ought better do that.

His written record would probably fail to give him any distinction between the value of these forms. But if he listened to us long enough, and if fortune favored him, he might learn that the normal good form is the first; that the second is more deliberate and elevated; that the other two strike us as unidiomatic, vulgar, pedantic, or what you will,—in short, as incorrect. So in Menomini we have, for "What are you laughing at?"

wā'ki' wā'h-ayā'niyan?  
wā'ki' ayāyō'sinamaq?  
tā'ni' wāhtā'hpīyan?

The first form is illiterate, childish, stupid; the second is normal; the third elevated, poetic, archaizing.

Some people say tsī'hpīn instead of kī'spīn for "if;" this sounds as bad as *git* and *ketch* in English.

Here is a sketch of the linguistic position of some of the speakers whom I knew best:<sup>2</sup>

Red-Cloud-Woman, a woman in the sixties, speaks a beautiful and highly idiomatic Menomini. She knows only a few words of English, but speaks Ojibwa and Potawatomi fluently, and, I believe, a little Winnebago. Linguistically, she would correspond to a highly educated American woman who spoke, say, French and Italian in addition to the very best type of cultivated, idiomatic English.

Her husband, Storms-At-It, a shaman, is half Potawatomi, and speaks both languages. Of English he knows not even the cuss-words. In Menomini he often uses unapproved,—let us say, ungrammatical,—forms which are current among bad speakers; on the other hand, slight provocation sets him off into elevated speech, in which he uses what I shall describe as spelling-pronunciations, together with long ritualistic compound words and occasional archaisms. He corresponds, perhaps, to a minister who does not put on much "dog," speaks very colloquially in ordinary life, but is at the same time very intelligent and able to preach or exhort in the most approved semi-biblical language.

Stands-Close, a man in the fifties, speaks only Menomini. His speech, though less supple and perfect than Red-Cloud-Woman's, is well up to standard. It is interlarded with words and constructions that are felt to be archaic, and are doubtless in part really so, for his father was known as an oracle of old traditions.

Bird-Hawk, a very old man, who has since died, spoke only Menomini, possibly also a little Ojibwa. As soon as he

departed from ordinary conversation, he spoke with bad syntax and meagre, often inept vocabulary, yet with occasional archaisms.

White-Thunder, a man round forty, speaks less English than Menomini, and that is a strong indictment, for his Menomini is atrocious. His vocabulary is small; his inflections are often barbarous; he constructs sentences on a few threadbare models. He may be said to speak no language tolerably. His case is not uncommon among younger men, even when they speak but little English. Perhaps it is due, in some indirect way, to the impact of the conquering language.

Little-Doctor, a half-breed, who died recently in his sixties, spoke English with some Menomini faults, but with a huge vocabulary and a passion for piling up synonyms. In Menomini, too, his vocabulary was vast; often he would explain rare words to his fellow-speakers. In both languages his love of words sometimes upset his syntax, and in both languages he was given to over-emphatic diction, of the type of spelling pronunciation.

Little-Jerome, a half-breed, now in the fifties, is a true bilingual. He speaks both English (the dialectal type of the region) and Menomini with racy idiom, which he does not lose even when translating in either direction. He contrasts strikingly with the men (usually somewhat younger) who speak little English and yet had Menomini.

To recite the features of good and bad Menomini would be to annotate almost every item of the grammar, and many of the lexicon.

In the pronunciation of good speakers, Menomini has, of course, its typical cadence and glide-sounds. Young people who speak English often diverge in Anglicizing the pronunciation. Older

<sup>2</sup> As some of these persons are living, I give only an English translation of their Indian names.

bad speakers exaggerate certain glide-sounds and miss some of the cadences, confusing short and long vowels. Over-elegant speech, on the other hand,—as from the lips of shamans or of the well-educated Little-Doctor,—displaces the stress-accent toward the end of the word, and gives full long quantity to vowels which in good, idiomatic speech are not entitled to it. This last feature is a fairly close parallel to our "spelling-pronunciations," such as the full form *fore-head* for *forvəd* and the now perhaps accepted *waist-coat* and *seam-stress*, for *weskít* and *semstress*. Only, there is no writing in Menomini, hence no spelling to explain "spelling-pronunciations." Sometimes there is a clear analogic basis. Thus the word

ninā'tumik "he calls me"

may be distorted to

ninā'tōmik

or even to

ninātō'mik;

the *ō* being the long vowel that corresponds in Menomini to the short *ū*. Now, these distorted forms are probably due to the influence of other inflectional forms which properly have the long *ō*, such as

nina-natō'mik "he will call me."

But in other cases this explanation seems not to hold, as when

atā'himín "strawberry"

is in spelling-pronunciation

atā'hēmē'n,

where the long *ē* corresponds to short *ĭ*.

As a whole, this phenomenon is due to the fact that Menomini has a living

morphologic alternation of long and short vowels; in emphatic or rhetorical speech the long vowels are carried into forms where normally they do not belong.

In inflection, Menomini, like the other Algonquian languages, has an *obviative* form for subsidiary third persons. Thus, if our story is of a man meeting another man and of the ensuing occurrences, our first man will be spoken of in the normal third person form, and the other man in the obviative form. The good Menomini speaker has no such difficulty as we have with our single pronoun *he*. But bad Menomini speakers profit not at all from this distinction, but get as tangled in their two forms as a bad speaker of English with his one ambiguous *he*.

Whatever is hearsay and not the speaker's own experience has the predicate verb or particle in a special *quotative* form. Hence in traditional narrative all predicates are in this form, unless they be actual thoughts or speeches of the actors in the story, or parenthetical insertions of the narrator; these exceptions, indeed, make possible some nice shadings of sense and style. In ordinary speech even the bad speaker will use his quotatives correctly, but as soon as he embarks on a longer story, he may lapse into non-quotatives for whole sentences at a time, which make the story sound as though he had been present when it took place.

Many archaisms of the medicine-man's language are pinchbeck,—distortions in the direction of Ojibwa, or of Triballian. Others are genuine, as comparison with related languages will show. Still others are circumlocutions. No doubt the starting-point for these was in cases where the normal word was tabu during ritual. The Algonquian word for "bear" is lost in Menomini, and is replaced by a word which used to mean "little animal;" in ritual other terms are used, such as "ant-eater,"



"berry-gather," "Bruin." But the habit has been extended to words where there is no tabu; the shaman uses long compounds or derivatives, such as "extensive woman" or "grandmother-expanse" for "earth," and "standing-men" for "trees," or "eternal men" for "stones."

v

It would be useless to seek the criterion of good and bad Menomini by gauging the alternative forms as to consistency with the general system of the language, for Menomini, like English, contains many irregularities. It is often the irregular form that is the proper one, just as in English *You had better do it* is preferred to *You ought better (to) do it*, although the latter accords with the general forms of our syntax. Similarly, *forrid* is preferred to the logically more explicable *fore-head*. On the other hand, the irregular form may be less acceptable than a regular one: *I dove* is not so good as *I dived*, *I ain't* not so good as *I'm not*. A good Menomini speaker will say for "medicine-man"

maskihki'wineniw,

a form which has the accent on a syllable that in almost any other word would be incapable of stress, and has vowel-shortening in the last element; yet only a bad speaker will use the logical combination of the words "medicine" and "man," and speak the horrid-sounding.

maski'hkiw-inä'niw

The nearest approach to an explanation of "good and "bad" language seems to be this, then, that, by a cumulation of obvious superiorities, both of character and standing, as well as of language, some persons are felt to be better models of conduct and speech than others. Therefore, even in matters where the preference is not obvious, the forms which these same persons use are felt to have the better flavor. This may be a generally human state of affairs, true in every group and applicable to all languages, and the factor of Standard and Literary Language versus dialect may be a superadded secondary one.

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