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ABSTRACT

The following description sets forth the aims and methodology of a project in Arkansas dialect studies; summarizes the preliminary work being carried on; and outlines the future course of the study. The urgency of the need for such research is pointed out by Moreland: The South is a "formerly distinctive region that is fast losing its distinctiveness." Although the population of Arkansas is still predominantly rural, it is becoming more urbanized. Alterations in cultural patterns are being accompanied by changes in language patterns. The distinctive dialect characteristics must be recorded before they are obliterated, and the dynamics of this transition must also be observed and studied. A further reason for research is pointed out by McDavid: "Developing an understanding of Arkansas language patterns is an indispensible part of learning what it means to be an Arkansan." The author hopes that ultimately the Arkansas dialect project, as yet unnamed, will be but one part of "an exciting program" concerned with all aspects of Arkansas and its people. (AMM)

PROBLEMS IN THE STUDY OF ARKANSAS DIALECTS

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In September of this year with the splendid support and encouragement of Professor Claude W. Faulkner, Chairman of the Department of English, and Dean R. C. Anderson, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Arkansas, we embarked upon an ambitious project to study the regional and social dialects of the state of Arkansas. As of yet the project is still unnamed, for as you all know the selection of a name for such projects must be dependent largely upon the suitability of its acronym. Some of the suggested names that have been rejected are Survey of Arkansas Dialects (SAD) and the similar Survey of Arkansas Grammar (SAG), as well as the longer Beginning Linguistic Examination of Arkansas Communities (BLEAK [sic]). (I am still open to suggestions.) Although nameless the project has had, in my opinion, an auspicious beginning, and it has an exciting future. The following description sets forth the aims and methodology of this project, summarizes the preliminary work we are carrying on, and outlines the future course of our study.

Although there are numerous reasons for undertaking a study of dialects in Arkansas, particularly strong motives are best stated by two distinguished scholars, J. Kenneth Moreland and Raven I. McDavid, Jr. Moreland, a cultural anthropologist with a particular interest in the South, in his paper "Anthropology and the study of culture, society,

and community in the South," (1967:140) stresses the urgency of needed research:

> The South might be characterized as a formerly distinctive region that is fast losing its distinctiveness. It has been different from other American regions in its caste-like system of race relations, its agriculturally-based economy and its relatively slow industrialization, its fundamentalistic religion, and its feeling of separateness from the rest of the nation. All of these characteristics are probably being altered as cultural traits and patterns throughout America become similar.

Moreland's words are especially relevant for understanding the changes that are quickly altering the face of Arkansas. A few examples will illustrate the rapid changes that the state is experiencing. (At this time only preliminary census data are available for 1970; consequently, 1960 figures will be cited frequently.[1]) Although the population of Arkansas is still predominantly rural, it is becoming more urbanized. In 1930 79.4% of the population was classified as rural, and 60.3% as rural farm. In 1960, however, the rural proportion had declined to 57.2%, and the rural farm population was merely 18.6%. As the population has dramatically shifted from the farms to the towns and cities, notably fewer people are dependent upon agriculture for their livelihoods. In 1940 51% of the state's workers were employed in agriculture, but by 1960 the proportion had declined to just 16 out of each 100 workers. Arkansans, particularly those in the uplands, are rapidly losing their isolation, not only through mass communications, an improved highway system, and tourism, but also from the impact of inmigration. Baxter County in the north-central part of the Ozarks

provides an excellent example. In 1960 23% of the inhabitants of this county had entered within the past five years while the native population had been leaving at an even higher rate. The change has been even more rapid since 1960, for in the last decade the population of Baxter County has increased by over 50%, almost entirely through in-migration. Although 29 counties in the eastern and southern lowland portion of the state have lost population since 1960, only two counties in the Ozarks, Searcy and Newton, lost population during the same period. (Note, too, that the 1960 census revealed a decline in population of 6.5%, whereas preliminary figures of the 1970 census indicate an increase of 5.6%.) Arkansas is changing in other ways, too, notably in education. In 1890, when Harvard was already over 250 years old and the state of Vermont was celebrating the centennial of the nation's oldest state school system, Arkansas had just 25 public schools with a total enrollment of 410 pupils. In the 23,300 square miles of the Ozarks there were only three schools (Wilson 1959:7-8). The percentage of school-age children attending school increases each decade. For example, in 1940 54.3% were attending school, but in 1960 the percentage had increased to 70.7%. (Nevertheless, the median education level in 1960 was 8.9 years as compared to a national average of 10.6 years.) And perhaps most important, the shameful dual school systems appear to be reaching their long overdue extinction, but admittedly some stubbornly persist in segregationist strongholds in eastern Arkansas. The rapidity of these, and other, changes make the study of Arkansas dialects not merely imperative but urgent, for surely these alterations in cultural patterns are being accompanied by changes in language patterns. We must not only record the distinctive dialect characteris-

tics before they are obliterated; we must also observe and study the dynamics of this transition.

The second important motive is expressed in a rather personal statement of Raven McDavid. Although he reflects upon his developing interest in the 1930's in the language of his native South Carolina, his words are nevertheless appropriate for our interests. McDavid (1967:208) writes:

> Somehow it was apparent subliminally that if I could understand the language variations around me at home, I would come nearer realizing why people were as they were, and where I fitted in.

We share the belief with McDavid that developing an understanding of Arkansas language patterns is an indispensable part of learning what it means to be an Arkansan. It is our hope that ultimately the Arkansas dialect project will be but one part of an exciting program concerned with all aspects of Arkansas and its people. Thus, our interest is not confined to that of the scholarly linguist, for it is also that of the educator. It is our intention to disseminate knowledge about Arkansas dialects among the English teachers and the students throughout the state. In the future Arkansas need not be ashamed of the way they talk.

The first stage of our investigation is bibliographical. We are surveying the literature about Arkansas dialects to assess its worth and to get ideas useful in constructing the questionnaire for our survey. Despite considerable attention to the language of the inhabitants of the Ozarks, Arkansas dialects have been virtually ignored by linguists. Our accumulated bibliography consists of 67 entries, most of which are marginal or useless, and with just a single exception--a

slim wordlist, of little value, from southeastern Arkansas--they are concerned with Ozark dialect only. Most of these articles or chapters are linguistically unenlightened, repeating the naive assertion that Elizabethan English continues to be spoken in the Arkansas mountains, and the bolder writers claim that the mountain English is Chaucerian. Of scholarly interest are two dissertations and one M. A. thesis, which study three small areas of the hill country, and from which I prefer to withhold judgment at the moment.[2] (A third dissertation is in progress.[3]) The best source of information about Arkansas dialects remains Vance Randolph's Down in the holler: A gallery of Ozark speech, with all its limitations. Although Mr. Randolph does not claim to be a linguist, this superb folklorist has, nonetheless, provided us with a valuable book.

There remains almost everything to learn about Arkansas dialects. With the exception of the dissertation authors these writers have been concerned solely with folk, or old-fashioned, white speech. We must study not merely folk speech, but also the speech of the working class and middle class people of the small towns and cities; we must study the language of blacks as well as whites; and we must study the complex linguistic situations in the growing urban areas in the state. The implications are that our study of Arkansas dialects is, by necessity, a long-range operation, to which there should be at least four types of investigation.

The first is a wide-meshed survey similar to the traditional linguistic atlas surveys, but ours will be distinguished from the earlier linguistic atlas studies by numerous significant improvements in methodology. Second, we plan in-depth studies in relic areas, i.e.,

in those remote and isolated communities that appear to be characterized by more conservative forms than are used elsewhere in the state. Third, studies in focal areas, the dominant communities with economic and cultural prestige, are anticipated. These studies will be concerned with obvious cities of Little Rock, North Little Rock, Fort Smith, and Pine Bluff, but they should also focus attention to the other important cities in the state, all of which have complex and fairly unique patterns of urban growth. These are Hot Springs, with its bath houses, resorts, and race track; the university communities of Fayetteville and Jonesboro; West Memphis, the bedroom suburb across the Mississippi River from Memphis; Blytheville, the Delta cotton town that is now the site of a sprawling Air Force base; and El Dorado, the southern city with an economy dominated by the petroleum industry. (This list is also a list of the 10 largest cities in the state.) Fourth, we want studies of the language characteristics of children in order that we can make intelligent statements about the dialect differences between black and white children or disadvantaged and normal children, indeed if there are any quantitative or qualitative differences.

The goals of our work can thus be summed up with four general questions. Is it meaningful to talk of an Ozark dialect and a lowland dialect in Arkansas? (In other words, South Midland and Southern.) What is the extent of conservatism in mountain speech in Arkansas? What linguistic changes are occurring in Arkansas as it undergoes the transition from a rural to an urban state? Is it meaningful to talk about Black English in Arkansas?

The initial stage of our survey will consist of the preliminary

investigation in communities spread throughout Arkansas. The state has been segmented into 35 areas, based roughly upon a 35 mile grid. Within each area we will interview informants from the rural communities and small towns with the population character of the area generally reflected in the choice of communities. The selection of communities and informants will not attempt a precise equational representation of population statistics, yet they will reflect the general social characteristics of the state. I have previously cited statistics about residency, occupations, and education which should be taken into account, but there are other considerations. For example, in 1960 when the median family income for the nation was $5,660, in Arkansas it was merely $3,184. In 1960 47.7% of the families had incomes under $3,000, which is generally regarded as the poverty level, and 14.2% had family incomes under $1,000 per year. On the other end of the scale only 5.5% had incomes over $10,000. Also, Arkansas' population has never been more than 28.1% black (in 1910), and in 1960 21.9% of the people were black, the vast majority living in the eastern and southern parts of the state. These social characteristics will be generally reflected in the selection of our informants. Within each zone we will interview white informants representing three social classes:

1. Lower Class: Grade school education or less; laborers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, unemployed, welfare recipiants, etc.; struggling existence.
2. Working Class: Perhaps some high school; blue collar workers, small farmers; more comfortable living conditions.
3. Lower Middle Class: High school graduates; small businessmen,

craftsmen, white collar workers, semi-professionals; pillars of the community, children in college, luxuries. (In some instances Upper Middle Class informants will be interviewed.)

In those parts of the state with blacks in significant proportions, we will interview in each zone three Negroes, one from each type. We expect to have approximately 105 white and 48 black informants.

These informants will be interviewed by fieldworkers using a questionnaire which we are now in the process of compiling, drawing upon items used in various dialect surveys around the country and upon relevant items discovered in the reading program. In addition to deleting unproductive questions and adding new ones that are useful with Arkansas informants, we are redesigning the format of the interview, which will consist of four parts. The first is non-directive or conversational; it is designed to provide vocabulary items as well as the context for the informant's casual style or pronunciation and syntax. After the fieldworker has established rapport with the informant, he will move to a directive portion of the interview, which consists of specific questions designed to elecit the informant's careful style of pronunciation. For certain informants there will be an optional third portion of the interview, at which time they will be asked to read a standard passage in order that we can record their reading style. (This will be omitted for those who would be embarrassed by the task or who could not perform it.) Finally, the interview will conclude with a period of free conversation; at this time the informant will have the opportunity to talk about his particular interests, skills, experiences, etc. He may be encouraged to give his recollections of

an earlier era, to tell stories or jokes, or to contribute whatever he can that has folklore value. The entire interview will be recorded with Sony TC-800B recorders that are battery operated and equipped with dual microphones. These recorders have such excellent frequency ranges--from 30 to 13,000 c.p.s. at 3 3/4 i.p.s.--that the fieldworkers will not be burdened with making phonetic transcriptions during the interview.

For the present I will defer statements about plans for editing and publication in order to summarize the present state of the research. We are engaged in the reading program I described earlier, and we are in the process of constructing a questionnaire, which we will begin testing soon. We are also in the process of selecting communities for investigation. We are studying census reports, state and local histories, and even the old Federal Writers Project state guide in order to select communities in each of the zones. In November we will begin preliminary fieldwork that will initiate our workers to the challenge of interviewing in field situations and will enable us to pre-test both the format and the content of the questionnaire. We have scheduled these test interviews in the vicinity of Siloam Springs in the northwest, Texarkana and Nashville in the southwest, Greenwood in the west-central part of the state, and Piggott in northeast Arkansas. (Others may be added, particularly in southeast Arkansas.) After studying the results of these pilot interviews and making whatever adjustments seem warrented, we hope to begin interviewing in earnest in the spring semester. At present there are eleven graduate students at the university who want to join me in the fieldwork.

The project I have outlined is obviously an ambitious one. It is clearly far too big a task for one man alone, and I have no intention of attempting this research in isolation. Thankfully, we have several very competent and enthusiastic graduate students at the university who are excited by the prospect of dialect research in Arkansas and are eager to participate in it. Even so, we welcome--no, we solicit the cooperation and participation of others in the state.

NOTES

[1]Census data for 1970 are taken from the Arkansas Gazette, August 1, 1970. Other population statistics are from the census reports listed in the references.

[2]Skillman 1952, Hoff 1968, and Harris 1948.

[3]This is a study of the language of Newton County which is being carried on by Miss Bethany Dumas, a graduate student at the University of Arkansas.

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