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AUTHOR Johnson, Dolores M.  
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## ABSTRACT

Two of the most stigmatized languages in the United States today are African American dialect and Appalachian English dialect. The attitudes many hold about Appalachia have come from the literature written about the place, the people, the cultural life of the mountain region, in general, and the spoken dialect. Arnow's "The Dollmaker," Jesse Stuart's works, the Foxfire books--all became mainstream successes and represented the culture of Appalachia, along with popular media shows such as the "Beverly Hillbillies" or "Mayberry." These works and shows told a story that accumulated in influence the more they were presented to the country, creating a singular image of a people and a place. Although linguistic studies disassociated intelligence, social status, and life style from regional dialect, this made little dent in the strong stereotypes that had been accepted by the public. Even the language used to talk about variants of American English contributes to the stereotypes. On one of their web sites the University of Tennessee uses the following words: "Appalachian English (AE) is a non prestigious dialect which has a very intricate rule system." And just as people from the mountain regions are beginning to understand and appreciate their heritage of language and culture, it appears to be "dying out." But just perhaps, a more diglossic equality of expression will begin to be seen as people move to accept as simply a language variation the regional dialects of American English that proliferate across the states. (Includes a sampling of 9 Internet sources on Appalachian identity.) (NKA)

# Appalachian Language: Back-talking the Stereotypes with Research and Technology.

by Dolores M. Johnson

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## **Appalachian Language: Back-talking the Stereotypes with Research and Technology**

**Dolores M. Johnson  
September 12, 2000**

If you tell a lie long enough, does everyone eventually come to believe it? It certainly appears so. I first became fascinated with language constructions of identity when I read over one hundred years of articles written about African Americans in my local home town newspapers. The redundant hammering out of a perceived identity of a people, as reported in the newspapers I looked at from 1872 until 1972, revealed (to me) an almost surrealistic plot to convince the reading public that that particular construction of the African American was a legitimate one. When I learned that most reported stories about African Americans in that hundred year period were drawn from police reports, then I could begin to form a response to the negative stereotype, and initiate the transformation necessary to release the internalization of false beliefs such reporting encouraged. The time had arrived to back talk the stereotypes. As the quoted language of black dialect appeared to support the stereotype, I decided to look at language first. This view led to a dissertation. Since that time, I have been fascinated with the ways that we use language to

construct identity, especially among minority populations within our culture.

Two of the most stigmatized languages in the U.S. today are African American dialect and the Appalachian English dialect. These languages re-present the standard American English dialect of the country, and they have come to re-present the people who speak them. The attitudes many hold about Appalachia have come from the literature written about the place, the people, the cultural life of the mountain region, in general, and the spoken dialect. Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, Jessie Stuarts's works, the Foxfire books, all became mainstream successes and represented the culture of Appalachia, along with popular media shows such as the "Beverly Hillbillies", and "Green Acres" or "Mayberry". These works and shows told a story that accumulated in influence the more they were presented to the country, creating a singular image of a people and a place, much like the newspaper articles about African Americans in my home town.

Even after linguist such as Labov, Smitherman, Shuy and others published their studies about language variation and dialects, the damage had already been done. Though their works disassociated intelligence, social status, and life style from regional dialect, it made little dent in the strong stereotypes that had been accepted by a general public. So much so that many Appalachians could identify with Tony Earley who wrote in a 1998 *New Yorker* article,

Only when I began to venture away from the universe that revolved around my grandmother's table did I come to realize that the language of my family was not the language of the greater world. I was embarrassed and ashamed when my town-bred classmates corrected my speech.

Later on in the article, entitled "The Quare Gene", he says,

I spoke in the Appalachian vernacular when I was with my family and spoke standard English when I wasn't [although] speaking it still feels slightly unnatural. In less generous regions of the greater American culture, the sound of Appalachian dialect has come to signify ignorance, backwardness, intransigence, and, in the most extreme examples, toothlessness, rank stupidity, and an alarming propensity for planting flowers in painted tractor tires.

Even the language we use to talk about variants of American English contributes to the stereotypes. While searching for articles relevant to Appalachian identity as constructed through the language and in literature, I came across this unusual site from the Department of Audiology and Speech Pathology of the University of Tennessee-Knoxville entitled "Appalachian Culture: A Thumbnail Sketch":

Communication patterns: Appalachian English (AE) is a non prestigious dialect which has a very intricate rule system. This accounts for the distinct speech pattern of individuals who speak Appalachian English.

In “Social and Regional Variation,” Albert H. Marckwardt and J.L. Dillard, note that dialectologists are coming to realize “that both class distribution of language variants and prejudice “against the users of “nonstandard”, used to classify and talk about language users, taint the speaker as being somehow “not correct”, not up-to-par. This kind of talk resulted in Appalachian poet Nikki Giovanni back talking the use of terms such as “disadvantaged or deprived” in her poem entitled “Nikki Rosa” when she says:

And I really hope no white person ever has cause to write  
about me because they never understand Black love is  
Black wealth and they’ll probably talk about my hard  
childhood and never understand that all the while I was  
quite happy.

But still the language and the people who speak it continue to be viewed in negative ways. Along these same lines, In “The power of discourse” Valerie Shepherd quotes the poet Tom Leonard (1986), in a sort of back talking poem to those who seem linguistically powerful.

And their judges spoke with one dialect  
but the condemned spoke with many voices.  
And the prisons were full of many voices,  
but never the dialect of the judges.  
And the judges said:  
No-one is above the law

Kathryn L. Staley's ethnographic report "Identity in a Mountain Family" a more recent writing, sounds a different tone. She speaks of Loyal Jones, one of the persons she interviewed in her study of the mountain family, who spoke in very positive ways about the values of mountain people: Religion, Individualism, Self-Reliance and Pride, Neighborliness and Hospitality, Family, Solidarity, Personalism, Love of Place, Modesty and Being One's Self, Sense of Beauty, Sense of Humor, Patriotism. That these same traits can be shown to be negatives by other writers, just proves that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or as the physicist say, we see what we want to see. Tony Earley, in "The Quare Gene", discovered the work of Horace Kephart who documented the language, geography, history and culture of southern Appalachians in a book called *Our Southern Highlanders*. Of this discovery, Earley's transformation comes, and he says,

It held for me the power of revelation. It told me who I was----or at least where I came from—in a way that I had never fully understood before. All the words I had thought specific to my family had entries in a dictionary compiled from Kephart's research. And all of them---with the exception of "quare," which is a mere two hundred years old—were words of Middle English origin, which is to say anywhere from five hundred to eight hundred years old.

Just as people from the mountain regions are beginning to understand and appreciate their heritage of language and culture, it appears to be “dying out” some say; others note that, “No language is a static property,” that the words of languages have life cycles that “mirror the life cycles of the individuals who speak them. Every language, given enough time, will replace each of its words, just as the human body replaces each of its cells every seven years.” (Earley). And just perhaps, we will begin to see a more diglossic equality of expression as we move to accept as simply a language variation the regional dialects of American English that proliferate across our states.

New voices rise to claim rights in the family of mountain culture, voices that have been silenced by historical oppression and the weight of linguistic blindness. These voices accept and revise the images and associated sounds of Appalachian culture. They enrich and complexify our concepts of language and what it means to be a regional writer and speaker. This generation’s acceptance will back talk the stereotypes that have identified negatively groups with rich linguistic variations, and abet this country in celebrating the diversity in language and cultural life that is our heritage. Perhaps, the changing future will bring us even closer to the democratic ideals of this nation at the highest and lowest levels of our societal life.



## A SAMPLING OF INTERNET SOURCES ON APPALACHIAN IDENTITY

D.M. Johnson

Literature plays a critical role in our lives, often without our notice. It sets the scene for us to explore both ourselves and others, to define and redefine who we are, who we might become and how the world might be. Judith A. Langer.

What is Appalachia? This site gives an overview of Appalachian culture and heritage. It is sponsored by the Center for Civic Networking.

<http://www.civicnet.org/webmarket/appcult2.html>

The Affrilachian Poets. Charlie Brown has a brief overview of the Affrilachian Poets origin and current interests. The site is the work of Dr. Stephen D. Mooney, who has this up as part of his course on Appalachian writers. Explore the site directory for many other writers.

<http://athena.english.vt.edu/~appalach/main/appydirectory.html>

Three Affrilachian poems . A selection of poems by Frank X. Walker, Kelli Ellis, and Nikki Finney.

<http://www.brightleaf-review.com/Fall98/affrilachian.html#top>

<http://www.brightleaf-review.com/Fall98/hobson.html>

Neurogenic Articles. I found this site while browsing for information on Appalachia identity. This particular article comes from The Multicultural Electronic Journal of Communication Disorders. It is interesting as an example of a view of Appalachian culture and people for this audience.

<http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~abrice/roark.html>

Dialinks. This page provides a wealth of links on dialects throughout the world. The specific URL given here focuses on English dialects in the USA, Canada, and Australia.

<http://users.senec.com.au/~rjs/dialect/Englinks.htm>

American Dialects. An annotated listing of links relevant to American Dialect study are provided at this site. List Appalachian dialect as a subheading under Southern dialects.

<http://www.netaxs.com/~salvucci/AmDialLn.html>

KYLIT. Kentucky's literary heritage is indeed a strong one, but unfortunately reference materials and biographical information concerning Kentucky authors are difficult to find. This site attempts to address such a lack.

<http://www.english.eku.edu/services/kylit/default.htm>

Identity of a Mountain Family. Kathryn L. Staley's begins her ethnographic study of mountain life with these words:

With the influx of outsiders moving into the Appalachian region, concern has risen among native inhabitants about changes in their communities and the perceived disintegration of their culture. As they watch their youth mature and newcomers interact within their communities, longtime mountain residents realize that both the influx of outsiders and the cultural abandonment by youth jeopardizes the "mountain way of living."

<http://www.acs.appstate.edu/dept/anthro/ebooks/ethno97/staley.html>

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| Signature: <i>Dolores Johnson</i>  | Printed Name/Position/Title:<br>Dolores Johnson, Associate Professor |                   |  |
| Organization/Address: Marshall University<br>400 Hal Greer Blvd.<br>Huntington, WV 25701 | Telephone: 304-696-6416  | Fax: 304 696 2448 |  |
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