

Appalachian Dialects in the College Classroom:  
Linguistic Diversity and Sensitivity in the Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this presentation is to encourage college teachers of writing, inside and outside Appalachia, to look at dialect-based errors in a more expansive way even as they help students to make better choices about standard usage. The discussion, which is presented within the context of a socio-cultural perspective on bias in perceptions of error, is intended to invite teachers to be more tolerant of diversity as they guide students to use “Standard American English.” Errors illustrating the discussion have been adapted from the writing and oral speech of students from southern Appalachia and are analyzed within the context of linguistic roots and language evolution. Linguistic analysis of errors includes the common “had went” contrasted with a more archaic yet “correct” usage, as well as nonstandard verbs and participles. Related attention is given to how oral pronunciation can invite biased perceptions of error. The presentation concludes with advice on how to be sensitive to diversity issues in the classroom.

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*You can be a little ungrammatical if you come from the right part of the country.*

*Robert Frost*

*. . . our pedagogy must reflect awareness of the conditions around us.*

*Gail Y. Okawa*

When I first moved to southwest Virginia to teach at a college committed to first-generation Appalachian students, I was struck by new errors I began to hear and see. Here is an example: “Milkman had went on a journey to find his roots.” Not only students made this error. When I heard colleagues who had grown up in the region and gone off for doctorates to come back to teach utter the construction, it sounded discordant. I admit that it rankled as I tried to teach students not to write with it too. After almost twenty years teaching in Appalachia, I have to say that “had went” bothers me much less now than—say—the educated person’s use of the incorrect pronoun case or a verb error in an important publication. That is not because I have grown accustomed to the error but because I have become more sensitive to the linguistic roots of such errors. In my presentation I want to share an epiphany of sorts that led me to be less of an outsider perceiving the quirky errors of my new students. My goal is to help others who teach writing, even outside Appalachia, to look at errors in a more expansive way even as we help students to make better choices about standard usage.

How did I get over my prim response to “had went” and other nonstandard verbs?

I was reading Gerry Knowles’s A Cultural History of the English Language—an intriguing book that connects language evolution with social, cultural, and political trends—and got to a chapter on a paradigm shift in grammar instruction that led to a need to control and shape language for purposes of both etiquette and power. By the eighteenth century, prescriptive grammarians were hard at work figuring out a way to standardize grammar rules. Robert Lowth, for example, made a case for putting adjectives before nouns and affirmed the English-language need to put the occasional preposition at the end of a sentence (Knowles 125). As grammarians began to codify English the way Samuel Johnson wanted to codify words, some creative dissonance began to emerge from the interests of prescriptive and descriptive scholars.

Language rules evolve. I have been teaching English long enough to watch the comma link, a perfectly acceptable sort of punctuation to connect two independent clauses, evolve to the comma splice in most college handbooks. I have watched handbooks move from insistence on “his” as the pronoun to use with indefinite pronouns to “his or her” to replace a “their” that was once acceptable. Of particular relevance to today’s topic is Robert Baker who, in Reflections on the English Language, a book published in 1770, voiced his objection to “went as a past participle” (Knowles 126). Forget the fact that Baker was a self-pronounced grammarian who based his beliefs on his classical training, not on any breadth of knowledge about current scholarship or usage trends in grammar. Knowles remarks that Baker’s influence became widespread, and forms he condemned came to be echoed by others who wanted to rid the English

language of bad influences or inconsistent usage (126). There is just one catch. Baker's efforts to standardize English were presented before the invention of the Information Superhighway. Nobody was able to inform the rural inhabitants of the new world, including rural southwestern Virginia, long the frontier of the new world, immediately to stop using *went* as a past participle.

Once upon a time, there was a verb "to wend." It meant, among other things, "to go forward, proceed; to journey, travel; to take one's way" (OED, 2nd ed., s.v. "wend," 13). Another meaning of the word that conjoined this one over time was "to go off, away, or out; to depart." According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "The original forms of the past [past tense] and past participle [past participle] are respectively wende and wended, wend, but the forms wente, went appear beside these from c 1200, and latterly become the more usual." For a spell, "had went" was acceptable. Then, for some reason, that phrase lost favor, especially among prescriptive grammarians such as Baker. We now hear echoes of this verb "to wend" when we hear somebody say "The Scot-Irish wended their way to Appalachia" or "He had wended his way through the Smoky Mountains." I also hear echoes when I hear my students say "had went," with an archaic usage that illustrates not so much ignorance but the persistence of a strong oral tradition.

Errors in college writers abound. We all know that errors sometimes appear because of confusion about rules or lack of instruction. Other times, errors are based in the vernacular or archaic usage. Sometimes confusion about rules is coupled with the vernacular. And so on. When an error seems more ignorant than incorrect, writing teachers need be sensitive to the cultural origins of error—whether the origin is based in

archaic usage or lack of literacy or both— in order to help students make a transition to more standard usage. It is true that many errors seen as Appalachian are found in other parts of our country. There is something about the stereotype of Appalachia, however, along with the southern Appalachian tone of voice, that feeds the notion held by some that an error based in rural Appalachian grammar error is relatively worse than certain grammatical errors made by urban students or college professors. We see somebody who makes the error as perhaps less intelligent or schooled than somebody who makes a more socially acceptable sort of error.

Here are some of the less socially acceptable errors associated with Appalachian dialect:

- Which one of them books should I read first?
- We come up with a bunch of different examples.
- One we seen in the book was Scylla.
- I've already ate, so I can come to your office now.
- Candide done tended his garden.

And so on. Let me remark that students who make such errors for me have gone through many years of schooling. They have passed the Virginia Standards of Learning Tests, or similar tests, and are deemed competent in English. They have dutifully filled out work sheets and lived with the red ink and lost points that persistent errors invite. Students whose dialect-based errors haunt them have been told many times that they are making errors, and in many cases they have been required to take remedial English above and beyond the basic courses required in college.

When an error is so much a part of oral culture, engrained in a person's psyche and language map, it is more difficult to work with; fortunately, it is not an impossible task to learn alternatives. Treating students with respect, acknowledging the interference of the vernacular, and talking about linguistic history have helped me. I especially like to see the look in the eyes of my students when I go off on a tangent about archaic grammar usage and how errors can be based in changing opinions about how language can work. "Archaic" is a gentler term than "ignorant." It helps students to connect with their past and see that language evolves. It is easier to feel as if you are out of step than just plain ignorant. If errors signify class distinctions, class distinctions can affect the perception of the speaker or writer even in the best of classrooms. One of my students, who will remain anonymous here, has been working since coming to college to negotiate two linguistic worlds: one in which she uses "ain't" and double negatives and says "have went" or "we done" and one in which she is meticulous about editing her papers and sometimes self-conscious about her accent. If she had the power to clear up one geographic stereotype, she would say, "People from the mountains are not all dumb and ignorant. We do have electricity." Appalachia not only has electricity but also people wear shoes and use punctuation.

There also may be an occasional need to separate a student's utterance from its metalinguistic frame, in some cases the southern Appalachian accent because an error can sound more serious in some tones of voice. Speech language pathologists Anthony Roark and Gloriajean Wallace have the following advice for pathologists who want to be sensitive to dialect: "It is important for the reader to familiarize themselves with rules of

the Appalachian language system so as not to inadvertently bias judgements about communication proficiency during clinical testing.” This sort of sensitivity, even if invited within a sentence that uses a faulty form of pronoun, can be useful to teachers of writing. It is not always evident inside Appalachia, or out, as evidenced by Sandra Mitchell-Quinn, who has written about how she was treated as an English student with a language deficit when she moved from a rural Appalachian community to Cleveland to attend college. Sol Adler, author of Multicultural Communication Skills in the Classroom, abhors such practices and states that “differences are not to be construed as the ignorant verbalizations of rural farmers.” Adler asserts, “Appalachian speech has a definite place among standard English utterances and should be considered as equal, not as substandard” (62).

Despite assertions from people such as Adler, Roark, and Wallace, bias against Appalachian English—oral and/or written—exists. For example, Carolyn Pelilo Atkins studied employment practices to discover that recruiters negatively rated Appalachian English, which they seemed to associate with the traits of "unorganized," "lazy," "inferior," and "unprofessional." Why is it that people with nonstandard accents are perceived as more ignorant than those with more socially acceptable ones? When Coleman McCarthy spoke at our campus recently, nobody raised an eyebrow when he made the following observation: “Nobody here today made it on our own.” Sometimes, perhaps because of my own southern accent, colleagues correct me when I am not making a mistake. Accompanied by an Appalachian or southern intonation, an error seems more conspicuous to people who are partial to Standard American English;



furthermore, people expect errors, I think, when an accent is nonstandard. What can I say? There is a double standard, just as there is a double standard for speakers of so-called Black English. In 2002, I wrote *CNN* to complain about language bias when a story on the sniper shootings quoted an African American person with a “sic” next to his nonstandard “you was” but did not call attention to their own author’s misplaced modifier or improper pronoun case elsewhere in the story (“Sniper Suspects”). Nor does *CNN* tend to assign “sic” to ungrammatical statements uttered by white attorneys or other people of authority.

In written texts, without the accompanying accent, errors also may seem startling to teachers who may be more accustomed to errors based on confusion of the rules than on dialect. Although a nonstandard verb may seem more troubling than a dangling participle, we have to remember that we are the ones who assign the values to different types of errors. Our values can affect how we respond to errors in writing. There are, in fact, a number of humane ways to approach errors based in dialect. Katherine K. Sohn, in a paper she presented at this same conference in 1994, observed that we need to remember the distinctive ethnicity of rural mountain whites, whites whose linguistic differences are often overlooked in studies on language or diversity. Sohn helps her students to see their errors as they learn to code-switch, which is a way to affirm their dialect in certain contexts and use Standard American English in others. She says, “Code switching will enable my students to use their home and school language to accomplish their purpose of maintaining their relationship with their families and learning the language of the academic community as well.”

Sohn's advice reminds me of lessons I learned from Geneva Smitherman and Mina Shaughnessy. Smitherman's Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America came out the same year Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations was published, 1977, the year I began teaching English 101. Smitherman would want writing teachers to look for cultural connections to understand error, just as Shaughnessy would ask us to look for the logic of apparent mistakes. Shaughnessy said of the basic writer, "Sometimes habit will control his choice in the direction of his mother tongue, leading him to use a form that is present in that tongue but absent in formal English . . . or to omit a form that is required in formal English but not in his mother tongue . . ." (103-104). Teaching in Appalachia, I have learned that the mother tongue need not be a foreign language or African-influenced English. It can be English influenced by Great Britain.

Let us forget about how Milkman had went for a moment and reflect on another common error I have to work with in my Appalachian students. Consider "I done read my assignment," something a student in my first teaching job in South Carolina might have said as well. That discordant adverbial or helping verb, depending on how you look at it, generally is considered peculiarly American as it results from creolization of English and an African dialect. Listen to the words of Mariah Jackson of Athens, Georgia, who on December 13, 1938, said to WPA collector of oral histories Grace McCune, "Some of my friends done kilt hogs and sont 'em to me, and if you don't mind I'd lak mighty well to finish cookin' our treats, 'cause I'se hongry." The use of done to show completion of past action, especially with emphasis, is also considered Appalachian, with roots in a dialect of England. "Well, it looks like I done pretty good," Susie Simmons, born in 1871 in

Tennessee, said to Elmer Turnidge January 6, 1938, when he interviewed her to learn about migration from the coal fields to the cotton mills.

A related error involves the use of done as a verb all by itself. Consider “I done it,” an expression that uses done as a contraction for both “have done” and “did,” depending on the context of the expression. This usage, widespread in Appalachian dialect, is considered a verb error. While teachers unfamiliar with dialect may perceive this error as failure to conjugate a verb correctly, students who make this error are not necessarily having the trouble Shaughnessy saw with students “new” to rules who would misapply them. As Michael B. Montgomery points out in his Dictionary of Smoky Mountain Speech, done signifies a “variant past-tense form” of do that is part of the oral and written culture of Appalachia (Smoky Mountain English 179). The error can be traced in written usage to as early as 1803. Montgomery, who has examined Scotch-Irish influences on Appalachian English, sees a connection between the Scotch-Irish emphatic use of “done,” which is similar to the African-American use, in “My friends done kilt hogs” (“Scotch-Irish” 202). Done all by itself seems peculiarly Appalachian, or American, but the error is actually one that teachers in New Zealand, as well as southwestern Virginia, have to contend with because of the influence of vernacular English from England in their own classrooms (“Exploring Language”).

Obviously my point today is that I would like writing teachers to be wary of the linguistic roots of errors as they address them in writing in order to respect students who may seem less “educated” or “sophisticated” than others simply because of the influence of the vernacular. Before I conclude, though, I need to offer a caveat. We do not want

to be so sensitive that we assume all students from southern Appalachia, either in schools in the region or across the country, will exhibit written or verbal errors based in nonstandard Appalachian dialect. While we want to be aware, as Sohn has taught us, that often “rural kids have bad grammar and slower, slurred speech,” college teachers also have the challenge trying to work through an educational system that often seems them as somehow more inferior than students with bad grammar—without the slower, slurred speech—in other parts of the country. We need to realize that some of these students may speak and write perfectly standard English despite their Appalachian intonations. Many of mine do. These tend to be the students who have been actively engaged with published texts for years. When students do bring peculiar errors to college, my job is not to make them feel inferior but to lead them to see the linguistic roots and idiosyncratic logic of their own errors so they can improve their writing. I also tell them that they perhaps need to be even a little bit more grammatical than people with standard dialects and accents as well—at least until bias takes a holiday.

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