

Language Variation
in North American English
Research and Teaching



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DARE in the Classroom

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EVERYONE is interested in dialects—even if we customarily think of them as the funny way other people talk. And a dictionary is the kind of book most people go to when they want to know something about language. Yet most dictionaries give relatively little information about dialect—indeed, little about any form of our language other than the standard use that appears in the straightforward prose of our leading national newspapers and publishing houses. Now, however, there is a dictionary that tells about various forms of nonstandard American English. The *Dictionary of American Regional English*, under the chief editorship of Frederic G. Cassidy, is being published.

DARE, as the dictionary is acronymsously known, is a remarkable book. The making of this dictionary, the history behind it, its relationship to other dialect studies—one can read about all such matters in the introduction to the book. But one of the most remarkable qualities of *DARE* is the range of appeal it has. It is a scholarly dictionary, prepared by learned editors, to be used by the scholarly world. But in addition, it has a popular appeal unmatched by any other academic wordbook in our time. *DARE* is not only a learned book; it is a fun book. That quality makes it especially suitable for use in the classroom.

The words *DARE* records are those that interest all speakers of English—the everyday, funny expressions that make up our discourse, not as a whole people, but as the motley crew we are. *DARE* treats those portions of our vocabulary that are not part of standard use, that are limited to one or another part of the country or to one or another social group. It deals especially with “folk” words, the natural language of unsophisticated people unimpeded by an editor’s notion of how they ought to be talking or writing.

The regionally and socially limited vocabulary of English interests us because we want to know whether others are familiar with the odd terms we know and what outlandish ways of talking our fellow citizens have come up with. These are not scholarly motives exactly, but they are human ones.

To try to illustrate the unscholarly, fun aspects of the dictionary is to encounter an embarrassment of riches. Here indeed is God’s plenty. The first volume of *DARE* covers the letters A–C, and they alone are an endless source of instruction and delight. *DARE* is probably the best book in existence to use for teaching students how to browse through a dictionary—and enjoy the process. A sample of the kind of browsing that can be done with *DARE*, and of the results of such browsing, is the quiz below.

Quiz: What's That Stuff?

Match the term on the left with its meaning on the right.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| a. — Adam's ale | 1. bacon |
| b. — African dominoes | 2. burro |
| c. — African golf | 3. chamber pot |
| d. — Alabama wool | 4. codfish |
| e. — Alaska turkey | 5. cornbread |
| f. — Albany beef | 6. cotton |
| g. — Amish golf | 7. craps (use twice) |
| h. — Arizona cloudburst | 8. croquet |
| i. — Arizona nightingale | 9. deck of cards |
| j. — Arizona paint job | 10. diarrhea |
| k. — Arizona tenor | 11. donkey |
| l. — Arkansas asphalt | 12. downpour |
| m. — Arkansas chicken | 13. fat pork |
| n. — Arkansas dew | 14. hammer |
| o. — Arkansas fire extinguisher | 15. large bowie knife |
| p. — Arkansas lizard | 16. log surface of a road |
| q. — Arkansas T-bone | 17. louse |
| r. — Arkansas toothpick | 18. mustard |
| s. — Arkansas wedding cake | 19. newspapers |
| t. — August ham | 20. noose |
| u. — Aunt Jane's room | 21. penny |
| v. — Aztec two-step | 22. pigs' feet |
| w. — Boston dollar | 23. privy |
| x. — Boston screwdriver | 24. razor-back hog |
| y. — California blanket | 25. rice |
| z. — California collar | 26. roadrunner |
| aa. — California peacock | 27. salmon (use twice) |
| bb. — California prayer book | 28. salt pork |
| cc. — Cape Cod turkey | 29. sandstorm |
| dd. — Carolina racehorse | 30. sturgeon |
| ee. — Chinese grits | 31. tubercular person |
| ff. — Cincinnati oysters | 32. unfinished surface |
| gg. — Cincinnati quail | 33. water |
| hh. — Colorado mockingbird | 34. watermelon |
| ii. — Columbia River turkey | |
| jj. — Coney Island butter | |

The quiz was made up as follows: I went through volume 1 of the dictionary and picked out a fair sample of words that are derived from

proper names, especially place names (after all, this is a dictionary of *regional* English). Then I narrowed down that selection to certain joke words—specifically, terms that ironically compare their referents to markedly superior or opposite things and associate them with places or people. I tossed out some words to keep the list at a length that would fit on one typewritten page. The result is the list of terms on the left and the list of meanings of those terms on the right. The immediate aim of the quiz is to guess which terms and meanings match. The answers are in *DARE*, but for the sake of handy reference, here is the key: *a*33, *b*7, *c*7, *d*6, *e*27, *f*30, *g*8, *h*29, *i*11, *j*32, *k*31, *l*16, *m*28, *n*12, *o*3, *p*17, *q*1, *r*15, *s*5, *t*34, *u*23, *v*10, *w*21, *x*14, *y*19, *z*20, *aa*26, *bb*9, *cc*4, *dd*24, *ee*25, *ff*22, *gg*13, *hh*2, *ii*27, *jj*18.

One of my own favorite terms of this kind is missing from the dictionary. It is *Confederate champagne*, meaning “Coca-Cola.” But there are quite enough other words of this kind just among the letters A–C to make a quiz of reasonable size. If later volumes of *DARE* are also used, the supply will be very great. Students can supply other such terms, which they are likely to know but which did not make it into *DARE*. Terms of that sort can be sent to the editors of *DARE* at the Department of English, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706, for later volumes or revisions of the dictionary. In this way, even young or inexperienced students can make a contribution to scholarship.

To be sure, *DARE* is by no means limited to joke words of the sort in the quiz. There are serious terms enough amid the God’s plenty of this book. But even the joke words have their serious side. They illustrate a pattern of humor—irony—that is characteristic of American life from the frontier to the urban ghetto. They tell something about us as a people. They are basically good-humored, but some of them have an edge, and some show the ethnic, racial, or regional prejudice that is also a part of American life, indeed, of human life. A class discussion of what the terms imply and what stereotypes they reflect can be profitable.

Students with little or no linguistic background—for instance, high schoolers and college freshmen—can usefully play with terms like those of the quiz. Then they can make their own quizzes by browsing through the dictionary, looking for five to ten words that have something in common, and writing a list of the terms they have found and a list of the simple definitions of the terms (like those in the sample quiz). The resulting student quizzes can be exchanged or presented to the entire class, with a following discussion on the terms, their meanings, and limitations. The purpose of such quizzes is not to test knowledge but to play with language and in the process to learn something about variation, with its social and psychological concomitants.

Another kind of class activity based on *DARE* uses the questionnaire with which much of the dictionary's oral data base was gathered. The text of that questionnaire is printed in the front matter to volume I (lxii–lxxxv). The questions are grouped by subject, such as "Weather," "Furniture," "Foods," "Children's Games," "Schoolgoing," and nearly another two score. The teacher can make a judicious selection from those questions, according to the age and interest of the students, and conduct a mini survey of dialect in the class to see what answers students give, for example, to items such as "To stay away from school without an excuse" or "Other ways of answering 'no': 'Would you lend him ten dollars?' '———.'" (In using the *DARE* questionnaire, keep in mind that folk speech is sometimes indelicate, hence the need for selecting judiciously according to the audience.)

Students and teachers can also jointly make a selection of questions, thereby creating their own questionnaire for use in conducting a dialect survey as a class project. The students can administer the questionnaire to their parents, grandparents, or other older people with whom they have contact. For this purpose, the questionnaire is best kept short—a dozen to a score of items works well. A comparison of older-generation usage with the students' own responses may be interesting and lead to a discussion of generation differences and changes in society.

Whatever responses are gathered by these or other such means can be checked against the alphabetical listings in *DARE* to see whether the elicited terms are included. If they are not, send them to the editors of *DARE* for their future use—and let the students know that their work can actually be of use in this way. However, the collection of data is not the main point of such exercises. The results should always be discussed in class for what they show about ourselves, our society, and our knowledge of one another.

With more advanced students, the same sorts of exercises can be used, but with increasing sophistication in the items investigated and in the analysis of the results. For naive students, the aim may be simply to make them language-aware and to help them become conscious of the implications of language variation in society. Students in a linguistics class can benefit from studying parts of the introductory matter, such as Cassidy's concise essay "Language Changes Especially Common in American Folk Speech" (xxxvi–xl) and James W. Hartman's overview of phonological variation in the United States, "Guide to Pronunciation" (xli–lxi).

DARE includes some information appropriate for the scholar's attention and other information fit for the amateur's delight. Not many books can claim to serve both readerships, and to serve them well. *DARE* is one of those few. It is therefore an ideal tool for introducing students to the study of language variation.