

DARE Newsletter

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DARE: The View from the Letter Z

Joan Houston Hall

As this issue of our Newsletter goes to press, the DARE staff is hard at work checking page proofs to prepare Volume V for publication by Harvard University Press in March of 2012. As you can imagine, this is an exciting (and very busy) time for us! We hope you enjoy the following reprint of a 2010 Dictionaries article written by our Chief Editor. The conclusion of the article will appear in our Fall 2011 Newsletter.

In 1978 when Richard W. Bailey began planning for the first issue of the journal *Dictionaries* (which appeared in 1979), he asked Frederic G. Cassidy to write an article about the progress of the *Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE)*. By that time *DARE*'s editorial practices had been established, the letters A and E had been substantially finished, and work had begun on the letters B, C, D, F, G, H, I, L, and M.

Although Fred agreed that such an article would be appreciated by members of the Dictionary Society of North America, he also felt over-committed by other obligations. (A look at his bibliography suggests that at that time he would have been working on a review of J. L. Dillard's *American Talk for Language in Society*, an article about Gullah and Jamaican Creole for the *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics*, and a contribution to the four-volume festschrift for Archibald A. Hill.) Rather than simply plead overwork and decline Bailey's request, Fred offered the assignment to me. And as a newcomer to the field of lexicography, I was glad for the opportunity to get my feet wet.

Continued on page 2



Photo Credit: George Hall

Chief Editor Joan Hall accepting the Regents Academic Staff Award for Excellence on behalf of the DARE project (see article and additional photographs on page 5)

Also in This Issue:

DARE Receives Regents Award5
Names and Professor Cassidy6
In Memoriam: Richard W. Bailey7
DARE in the Twitterverse and Blogosphere . .	.7

Engrossed at that time in editing *DARE*'s letter F, I used an analysis of the first thousand entries in that letter to provide a preview of what the full *Dictionary* might look like. "*DARE: The View from the Letter F*" offered a detailed analysis of categories of entries, treatment of pronunciation and etymology, application of regional, social, and usage labels, and fine points of entry presentation. Now that Volume V (S1–Z) is close to publication, it is possible to have a much more panoramic view of the whole and to assess the impact of *DARE* as a scholarly undertaking and as a utilitarian tool.

In re-reading early articles about *DARE*, I have been impressed not only by how much has changed over the last half-century, but also by what has remained constant. The changes, of course, are particularly obvious in terms of computer technology. In early descriptions of *DARE*'s intended use of "electronics," Fred Cassidy eagerly embraced the idea that computers could drastically reduce the burden of the detailed, exacting analysis of data required in a massive survey of language. In 1968, for instance, he exulted that new computer methods had "already rendered the punch-card and punch tape archaic," and that there was now a way to actually delete a symbol or tell a scanner to ignore it, with the result that "nothing has to be rubbed out or repunched and substituted—one deletes and goes straight on" (1968:140).

By 1977, his enthusiasm had been somewhat tempered by experience:

“Let me just say hats off to you and *DARE*—one of our national treasures!”

David Pritchard
Haydenville, Massachusetts

“What fun it is to page through the volumes of your dictionary. It is a reference book, a time machine, and a letter home all at the same time.

“Your entry for **duck duck goose** took me back almost sixty years to my first teaching job in southern Minnesota, where my kindergarten students chided their Ohio-born teacher that the correct name for this game was ‘duck duck gray duck.’ Two years later I got married and moved to Wisconsin, where I had to learn to drink from a ‘bubbler’—which I have also looked up in your dictionary!”

Wilma Price
E-mail correspondent

We got off to a bad start when the CDC machine to which we were committed was pulled out of the Computing Center. The program associated with it would not run on other machines, and had to be converted. Time and money lost. The author of our program left the project, and his successors failed conspicuously to make it run. . . . At last we found a man who could and did make our program completely over and produce the material processed as we wanted it. But during all the conversions, errors were introduced and parts of the data lost. More time and money spent for special proof-reading and for redoing some of the input (1977:141).

That article, which was written with the hope that *DARE*'s experience might “be of interest for the future,” ended with this thoughtful reflection:

Perhaps the chastening is inevitable—it is the ‘vanity of human wishes’ to hope that life and lexicography can be trouble-free. If a good *Dictionary of American Regional English* can come out of it, the use of computers—in some ways—will have been justified (1977:142).

Cassidy's enthusiasm for digital technology began to revive as the programs that sorted the *DARE* fieldwork data and allowed computer mapping finally proved to be workable, and he applauded the progress as methods were developed to send the text of *DARE* to Harvard University Press on magnetic tape, and as in-house programs were designed to streamline many tedious editorial tasks.¹ Over the next decades, as all staff members started using personal computers, and as more and more digital resources drastically expanded the universe of illustrative quotations, Fred happily conceded that the use of computers was justified in more than just “some ways.” And the thought of the forthcoming electronic edition of *DARE* that will provide regular additions to the text as well as expansions and improvements on the existing entries would doubtless leave him smiling.

¹*DARE* Editor Luanne von Schneidmeyer was responsible for setting up the in-house production procedures, supervising production staff, and working with Harvard University Press. Editor Craig Carver designed the editorial programs.

In contrast to the rapid changes in computer technology over the life of the *Dictionary*, regular reminders of the value of the project have provided a welcome feeling of stability over time. In 1967 Cassidy expressed confidence that “the *Dictionary of American Regional English* [would] prove to be a valuable reference tool for scholarship in language and literature” (1967:19).

That modest prediction began to be fulfilled even before the publication of the first volume in 1985. By the mid-1970s *DARE* audio recordings were being used by scholars in Belgium, France, Hungary, and the USSR to illustrate the wide variation in American pronunciation. Before long, scholars from Germany, Poland, New Zealand, Japan, and Indonesia also visited the project, eager to allow their students the opportunity to hear American English spoken by native speakers from so many places. For scholars here in the United States, the recordings provided rich sources of data for phonological analysis of regional and social differences in pronunciation.² And the fieldwork itself had provided data for dissertations by at least eight of the *DARE* fieldworkers by 1977.

DARE's written collections were also made readily available to researchers from the beginning, and scholars came to search out the vocabulary of such disparate topics as architecture, gambling, logging, and weather forecasting. Journalists, always on the lookout for a good feature article, regularly mined the *DARE* archives, eager to validate their local usages as well as trumpet the forthcoming *Dictionary*.

Once the volumes began to be published, it became clear that the materials in *DARE* rendered it not just “a valuable reference tool for scholarship in language and literature,” as Cassidy had hoped,

²Early articles based on the recordings tended to focus on pronunciation patterns in specific communities, gender differences, or variation across recognized dialect boundaries. Decades later, following the digitization of the recordings, researchers were able to use them for such projects as measuring the progression of the Northern Cities Shift, investigating remnants of German dialect features in Wisconsin, studying laryngeal distinctions over time, and analyzing retroflex mid-central vowels among African-Americans. Throughout *DARE*'s history, the recordings have been used to great advantage by actors and dialect coaches, who could listen to examples of speech from nearly 1,000 communities, large and small, across the country.

“I love *DARE*! As a geographer/cartographer I first used it when doing research for a map. Since then I've often wished I had a set of the books for my home and am amazed how often regionalisms come up in conversations with friends. My plan is to buy one per year until I have a complete set. . . .

“I saw your request [on *DARE*'s Web page] for feedback about the strip of grass between the lawn and street. I learned it as a *devil's strip* in the mid- to late 1960s from my parents. . . . This was in Struthers, Ohio, . . . a small town south of Youngstown. . . . While I believe you already show use of this phrase from a small area of northeastern Ohio, perhaps this information can further refine its usage. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance. Keep up the good work!”

Margaret Popovich
E-mail correspondent

“I attended the UW–Madison Roundtable lunch today. [*DARE* Editor] Luanne von Schneidemesser gave a great presentation on Wisconsin words—quite entertaining, and lots of laughs about odd words that originated in German, Norwegian and other languages. A slide on lutefisk brought a particularly good bit of laughter, such that she asked how many people had ever eaten lutefisk (quite a few) and how many had eaten it more than once (several)!”

Karen Schwarz
E-mail correspondent

but a treasure hoard of information that could illuminate all kinds of scholarly (and sometimes not-so-scholarly) questions. Fortunately, we began to keep a bibliography of references to *DARE* decades ago, and in recent years digital search tools have made it easy to find additional citations, so we have a relatively complete picture of the ways in which our materials have been used.³

Linguists and lexicographers, of course, regularly consult the text for lexical information. But many have been surprised by the kinds of grammatical and syntactic information that is also contained in the entries. One such scholar was

³*DARE* is indebted to Proofreader Elizabeth Blake for maintaining the bibliography of all the references to the project of which we are aware. The list has more than 1,100 items, including scholarly references, reviews, and miscellanea.

delighted to discover that the entry for *be* had examples of perfective *I'm* in such phrases as "I'm had it today" and "I'm been gone," which corroborated his own research; much later, *DARE's* data on the distribution of *to* for *at* (as in "He was over to John's house") provided not corroboration but contradiction of his impression of the regionality of the usage. Another linguist used *DARE* evidence to reinforce his hypothesis that *spittin(g) image* comes ultimately from *spitten image* as well as to support his analysis of the seemingly contradictory New England constructions *so don't I, so haven't they, so wouldn't we, so aren't they*, etc., to mean *so do I, so have they*, etc. Still others have queried the *DARE* files for evidence of such structures as "positive anymore," *need* + past participle (as in "my dress needs washed"), and *which* as a conjunction (as in "I went to Atlanta, which my cousin lives there"). And the author of a book on the English passive found that the *DARE* fieldwork had examples of the "get-passive" (as in "I got fired") with more than seventy different verbs, while the received wisdom has been that the get-passive occurs with only a handful of verbs.

Unsurprisingly, literary scholars also turn to the pages of *DARE* for help in explicating the works of poets and novelists. Writers on Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, Thomas Wolfe, Marianne Moore, and T. S. Eliot, for instance, have come to *DARE* to understand lexical usages that are undocumented in standard dictionaries. And playwrights, novelists, and screen writers consult *DARE's* published and unpublished materials for guidance on whether particular words would have been appropriate in a given setting and time period. (Fred Cassidy was pleased to serve as language advisor to the producers of *The Last of the Mohicans*.)

Although librarians were always assumed to be principal users of *DARE*, they tend not to publish articles about their experiences in using it. So we are grateful when we receive letters describing

“I want to thank you and the *DARE* crew for your help with demonstrative *them*. I was having a tussle showing that *them* could be used in place of *these*, and your advanced entry helped me greatly.”

Professor Kirk Hazen
West Virginia Dialect Project
Department of English
West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia

specific examples. One letter, from a librarian in Putnam County, Tennessee, said this:

DARE . . . has come to my rescue on numerous occasions when I had no idea that an expression or word was regional. A good example: a library patron wanted information on dry-land fish. We looked in every "fish" book we could think of, to no avail. As the patron kept repeating that this fish "grew in the woods," and as I could not imagine *any* type of fish that would "grow in the woods," I finally got to wondering if this was a regional expression. And of course it was: a dry-land fish is an edible mushroom.

(It is not surprising that this letter came from Tennessee, for 15 of the 16 *DARE* examples of *dry-land fish* were from Kentucky or Tennessee—the other was from north Georgia.)

But librarians, linguists, literary critics, and writers are expected users of a reference work like *DARE*. It is the unanticipated uses that are particularly gratifying for us to hear about, because they make it clear just how many aspects of people's daily lives are affected by their use of language. ♦

[You can read about some of these "unanticipated uses" of *DARE* when the conclusion of this article appears in the Fall 2011 issue of our Newsletter.]

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Photo Credit: Jim Gill, UW System

Members of the DARE staff at the awards ceremony (left to right: Beth Gardner, Julie Schnebly, Ginny Bormann, Cathy Attig, Roland Berns, Janet Monk, Luanne von Schneidemesser, George Goebel, Regent Betty Womack, and Joan Hall; Elizabeth Blake was unable to attend)

DARE Receives Regents Award

On July 15 the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents honored the *Dictionary of American Regional English* with a 2011 Academic Staff Award for Excellence. The highest recognition bestowed on members of the UW System’s academic staff, this award “is intended to recognize and reward a non-instructional Academic Staff program that demonstrates excellence of performance and outstanding achievement from among all the UW System institutions.” Regent Betty Womack presented the award to Chief Editor Joan Houston Hall. ♦



Photo Credit: George Hall

Regent Betty Womack introduces the DARE project

Names and Professor Cassidy

Burr Angle and Dolores Kester

We love to hear from people whose lives have been touched by DARE. The authors of this article were grad students at UW–Madison in the 1960s; their work with Prof. Frederic G. Cassidy, founder of the DARE project, inspired them to take on a project of their own some forty years later.

In 1947 the American Dialect Society published *The Place-Names of Dane County, Wisconsin* by Frederic G. Cassidy. The University of Wisconsin Press published a revised edition as *Dane County Place-Names* in 1968; this was reprinted in 2009, also by the University of Wisconsin Press.

Most of the book is an alphabetical list of geographic features, schools, post offices, townships, villages, parks, and other places in Dane County, with a brief account of how each name was chosen. The book has become the constant companion of local historians, genealogists, newspaper writers, and many others.

In 2007 three of us—Burr Angle, Dolores Kester, and Ann Waidelich—began to study the origins of some Madison street names, partly as a follow-up to Cassidy’s book. By late 2010 the project had grown to eleven articles, mostly about areas of the city built up after 1900. Semi-final copies of the 275-page *The Origins of Some Madison, Wisconsin, Street Names* have now been distributed to Madison-area schools and public libraries, to the Wisconsin Historical Society, and to those who helped along the way.

“My work with you all is a highlight of my week.”

Ann Smiley
DARE Volunteer
Middleton, Wisconsin

“My wife and I have an ongoing dispute over the task of removing the husks from corn. She calls it ‘shucking’ (a term I and other Maine natives apply strictly to clams), and I prefer ‘husking,’ which I presume is the term of art in Nebraska as well. Ahhh, the joys of language!”

David F. Giroux
Executive Director, Communications & External
Relations
University of Wisconsin System

Of course, we used many of the maps, books, and articles that Cassidy listed as his sources and consulted his book many times. More importantly, we discovered that the best part of the project (aside from the thrill of the chase) was that we met some very interesting people. We’re sure that Cassidy felt the same way—he, too, enjoyed the discoveries, but his list of about 125 informants reveals he also enjoyed meeting people from all backgrounds, trades, and professions who shared his interest in words and people. We’ve tried to emulate his enthusiasm in our articles.

One consequence of Cassidy’s love of words, people, and getting a job done right was that he was a good man to work for. In the mid-1960s, as graduate students at the UW, Dolores read and took quotes from regional novels for *DARE* and Burr was a work-study student organizing materials collected by Professor Miles Hanley.

This was a tumultuous period, sometimes marked by distrust and bad feelings between students and faculty. That was not true of Cassidy, who was always respectful of his workers. We think he was polite to everyone partly because he was a decent man and partly because he was so busy he didn’t have time to fuss. ♦

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