

DARE Newsletter

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Dictionary of American Regional English

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Words of America: A Field Guide (Part 2)

Michael Adams

Here is the conclusion of a 2011 Humanities article dealing with the history of dialect geography and of the DARE project. (The first installment appeared in the Fall 2012 issue of the DARE Newsletter and can be accessed at <<http://dare.wisc.edu>>.)

Linguists and lexicographers have long been suspicious of isoglosses. They are a convenient, graphic result of the data, but they are an abstraction far removed from the data. They overgeneralize. And they overparticularize, as dividing lines tend to do: Dialects rarely change suddenly; they change gradually and continually. Isoglosses may not be “wrong,” but they operate at one scale, and dialect can be observed at various scales. Cassidy avoided isoglosses and mapped his data quite differently from linguistic atlases: “DARE’s regional areas inductively discovered do not have sharp outlines but thin out at the edges or merge with other features. The core of a regional area shows frequent or concentrated usage—on DARE maps, close clusters of responses. Thus clustering is taken as the measure of regionality.” Someone unexpectedly confronted with a DARE map would not immediately recognize it as a map of the United States. The size of the states is determined by population and settlement history, “hence the informant distribution, which is relevant to language use as mere area is not.” DARE literally reconfigures America as no other dialect geography had ever dared to do.

The maps depend on a pioneering use of computers. As Cassidy wrote, “The planners of DARE had realized from the first that the mass of data

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Photo credit: George Hall

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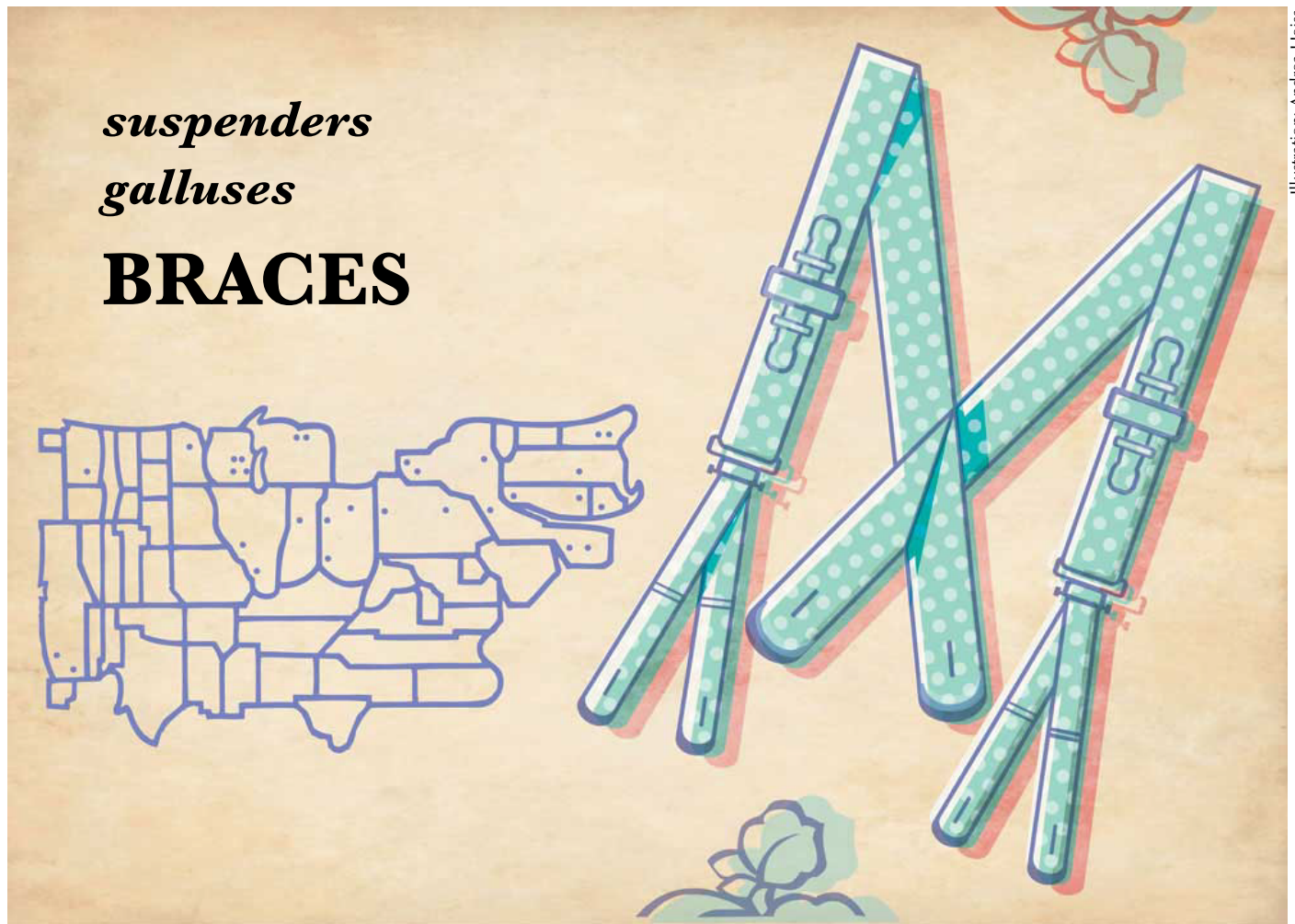
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would be large and that computer processing must be considered. In 1965, however, though numerical computing was well advanced, the handling of alphabetic material was only beginning." Cassidy was perhaps the first lexicographer to integrate computation fully into a dictionary project's production process, first and foremost to manage and manipulate data efficiently and effectively. His example, and his willingness to share his experience with others, has been influential, to say the least: It initiated changes in lexicography and in the methods of humanities research more generally.

Cassidy quickly realized that computers have other than alphabetic uses. Computers easily generate graphic displays with as many fields as necessary into which a dot can be inserted to indicate a particular word or phrase used by an informant. If all informants used a word, there would be a dot in every field, but where usage varies with dialectal synonyms, only certain fields would be filled.

With the power of the computer at hand, Cassidy wrote in 1977, "one can display in a few seconds the distribution of any response—a mapping capacity which one would never attempt by manual methods because it would be intolerably tedious and slow." As a result, the collection of *DARE* maps presents us with a much more fine-grained account of American regional words and phrases than any previous dialect geography and a more accurate visual account of their distribution.

But even more effective mapping cannot quite bring linguistic geography down to a human scale. As Louise Pound concluded, "Workers for the American Atlas record with scholarly vigilance the speech of the regions they canvass, endeavoring to preserve faithfully for posterity our twentieth-century regional distinctions; yet their results are no substitute for an exhaustive dialect dictionary." That is because, as Jacob Grimm put it, "every word has its history and lives its own life," a senti-



AKA bracers: The word is found chiefly North and North Midland. Evidence was gathered partly in the Wisconsin pilot survey with the question, "What does a man wear over his shoulders to hold up his trousers?" Map source: Dictionary of American Regional English: Volume I—A—C, edited by Frederic G. Cassidy, p. 360, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, copyright © 1985 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

ment that leads inevitably to a historical dictionary. As Cassidy acknowledged, "It should be obvious that the model for *DARE* was the *Oxford English Dictionary*, with some innovations, chiefly the use of maps and oral data specially gathered throughout the country in a single five-year period." The modesty of "some innovations" belies the importance of the maps and oral data.

The typical *DARE* entry includes elements one finds in all historical dictionaries: variant forms and alternate spellings; pronunciations, when they aren't transparent; etymologies, when they can be responsibly proposed; definitions and quotations starting with the first known recorded use of the term. Labels describe distribution; for instance, *bank barn* in the sense of "a barn built into the side of a hill, affording entrance on at least two levels" is labeled "chiefly, PA, OH, MD, VA, IN. See Map." For *bank barn*, the map shows outliers in New York, Illinois, Missouri, and Minnesota. Only five informants in Indiana supplied *bank barn*; west of Ohio, use of it "thins out."

Another feature that sets *DARE* apart is its unprecedentedly pluralist approach to evidence. The *OED* and some related dictionaries rely almost exclusively on quotations from printed texts. Their entries have a certain sheen; differences among sources are subtle. In the *English Dialect Dictionary*, Wright relied on material collected by the English Dialect Society and his own field research, but not on printed sources. While the texture of entries in Wright's dictionary is different from that of *OED* entries, it similarly offers readers a "smooth" reading experience.

By contrast, *DARE* entries have a homespun texture, demanding more of a reader, who must reconcile various types of information in order to understand what *DARE* has to say about a word or phrase. But if they pay attention, readers come away marvelously informed. A *DARE* entry might include any combination of quotations from regional literature, diaries, small-town newspapers, material from WELS, the various linguistic atlases (published and unpublished), other accounts of dialect in scholarly literature, substantial personal collections donated to the project by scholars at the ends of their careers (like the Gordon Wilson collection, from which *DARE* illustrated *dew poison*), and, of course, questionnaire responses, identified by informant, so that the curious reader can refer to the "List of Informants" to discover his or her community, community type, year of birth, level of education, occupation, sex, and race—all types of information that can be overlooked in other histori-

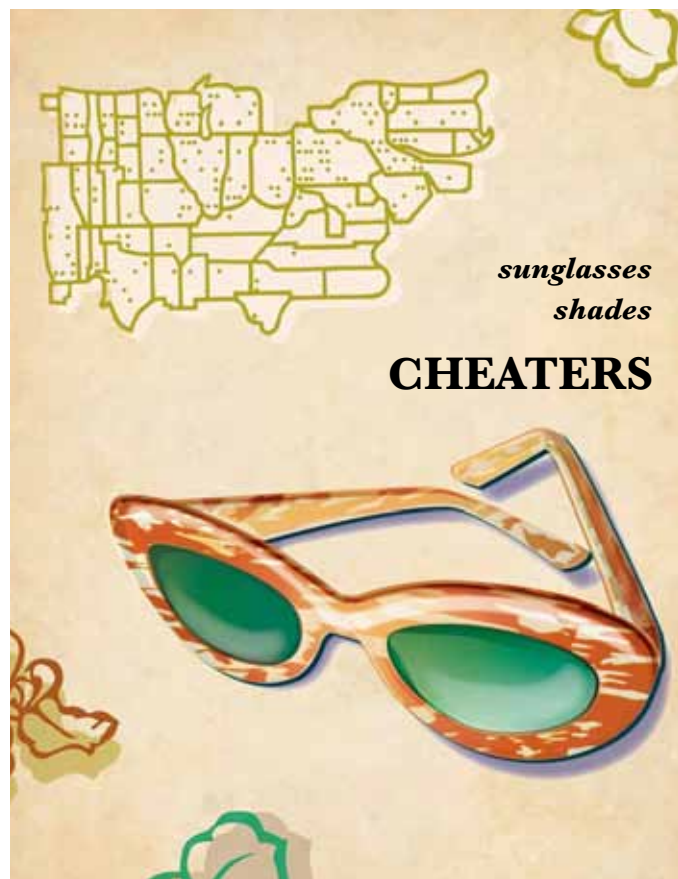


Illustration: Andrea Heiss

Cheaters, according to *DARE*, is found in the North, North Midland, and West. The first definition is "something which makes a job or activity easier." The second definition notes this term as African-American slang for eyeglasses, including dark eyeglasses, "later supplanted by shades." Map source: Dictionary of American Regional English: Volume I—A—C, edited by Frederic G. Cassidy, p. 598, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, copyright © 1985 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

cal dictionaries, but not in a twenty-first-century dictionary of American regional English.

DARE is a bold synthesis of linguistic atlas and historical dictionary. Until Cassidy proposed to do it, no one had imagined such a work; until it was published, many sociolinguists and lexicographers doubted Cassidy could bring it off. But when the first volume appeared, it was a revelation. As Walt Wolfram wrote in *American Speech* in 1986, "As ambitious a task as *DARE* has been, the first volume has exceeded expectations. I say this, not as a party-line ADS member who feels constrained to give a loyal endorsement, but as a repentant skeptic who more than once wondered if this long-promised work would ever be delivered . . . seeing the scope of the entries, I now understand why it was so long in the making."

In *DARE*, Cassidy reconceived dialectology and simultaneously introduced a new variety of historical dictionary. It was, perhaps, a typically American improvisation, or an example of New

World unconventionality aimed at Old World canons of authority. What seemed a revelation in 1985 will seem no less so next March, when the promise of *DARE* is fulfilled by publication of its final volume. Scholars of American language, history, and culture will rely on it, and they will enjoy it as much as lay readers. *DARE* teaches us about American regional speech, of course. It also teaches us to think big, put aside assumptions, draw on traditions when useful, and make things new. It says to us: Whatever transformative project in the humanities you may have in mind, dare to do it. ♦

Michael Adams is associate professor of English at Indiana University in Bloomington and author of, most recently, Slang: The People's Poetry (Oxford, 2009) and, with Anne Curzan, the third edition of How English Works: A Linguistic Introduction (Pearson Longman, 2009). He is currently editor of the quarterly journal American Speech.

NEH has been supporting the Dictionary of American Regional English since 1976, when the project was awarded a \$567,684 grant. Since July 2001, DARE has received six grants, totaling \$3.45 million, in support of volumes four and five.

(Originally published in the September/October 2011 issue of Humanities, the magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Reprinted by permission.)

Beta Testers Needed for “DARE Digital”

Interested in being a beta tester for the upcoming digital version of *DARE*? Go to <<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/dare/digital.html>> to fill out an application. ♦

DARE Editors Celebrate with HUP Colleague

While in Boston for the 2013 American Dialect Society meeting, Joan Hall and Luanne von Schneidemesser met Harvard University Press Editorial Manager David Foss for lunch to celebrate the publication of the sixth and final print volume of *DARE*.

For most of *DARE*'s history, David has collaborated with Luanne on the publication details unique to this project. His assistance with Volume VI was especially valuable, as developing the for-

matting and design for a supplemental volume presented new challenges for everyone involved. David's calm, easygoing manner facilitated the communication among *DARE*, the Press, and the typographers. ♦



Joan Hall with David Foss, Harvard University Press Editorial Manager

DARE Editor Addresses Dialect Society

As outgoing President of the American Dialect Society, Luanne von Schneidemesser gave the luncheon address at the Society's annual meeting in Boston in January. She talked about “Bubblers, Schnibbles, Lawyers, and Cheeseheads: Linguistic Outreach. The Wisconsin Idea.” Luanne also presented Presidential Honorary Memberships to three graduate students nominated by ADS members. The recipients were Paul Reed, University of South Carolina (pictured below), Janneke Van Hofwegen, Stanford University, and Shelly Swearingen, University of Michigan. ♦



Funding Update

Jon E. Sorenson
Director of Development

Spring is in the air, bringing with it memories of my first *DARE* Board of Visitors meeting almost seven years ago. I had just started at the University of Wisconsin Foundation and was delighted to learn that I would be representing this project. It has been a pleasure and an honor to work with *DARE*'s dedicated board members, generous supporters, and fine staff. Joan Hall has been a tremendous partner in securing funding for this scholarly gem, and I've enjoyed our many strategy sessions and successes along the way.

A recent promotion for me at the UW Foundation means that I will be passing the reins to an eager and able colleague, Toni Drake. She will be a valuable ally, working on funding for the digital edition and securing gifts for the crucial ongoing updates of the *Dictionary*. To make a tax-deductible donation to *DARE* by check or credit card, please use the coupon below. If you have any questions or would like information about making a gift of securities, real estate, or appreciated property, please contact Toni at <toni.drake@supportuw.org> or (608) 263-1658. ♦

Longtime *DARE* Staffers Retire

We take this opportunity to bid farewell to longtime colleagues Elizabeth Blake (who retired in December) and Luanne von Schneidemesser (who is retiring this spring).

Proofreader Elizabeth Blake joined the *DARE* staff in 1988. She came to the project with an MA in English Language and Linguistics from the University of Chicago and a wealth of editorial experience, having worked as an editorial assistant for the *Assyrian Dictionary*, Assistant Editor of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, a manuscript editor for *Wisconsin Trails*, and a freelance editor for numerous magazines and publishers in the Midwest. This background prepared her well to tackle the intricate process of coding, formatting, and proofreading *DARE* entries. None of us will forget Blake's meticulous attention to detail or her fondness for bad puns and good food (especially chocolate); her culinary creations were a highlight of every office birthday party or holiday celebration.

Luanne von Schneidemesser has been with the *Dictionary* since 1979. She first heard about the project while completing her dissertation at UW-Madison, when a fellow grad student showed her a newspaper ad for an editorial position. Her Ph.D. in German Philology and Linguistics and her experience as a fieldworker for the *Wortatlas der deutschen Umgangssprachen* made her an ideal candidate for the job. She began as an Editor, writing entries full-time, and went on to become Senior Editor for Production, supervising the production staff, overseeing *DARE*'s increasing use of computer technology, and working closely with Harvard University Press and our typographers to publish six volumes, coordinating a myriad of tasks (including the production of *DARE*'s distinctive maps).

The professional honors Luanne has received and the articles she has published are too numerous to list here. Named a Fellow of the Dictionary Society of North America in 2009, she recently completed a term as President of the American Dialect Society. In 2011 the University of Wisconsin-Madison awarded her the title of Distinguished Scientist. Even in retirement, Luanne has no intention of leaving the field of lexicography; she is the current Vice President of the Dictionary Society of North America and plans to co-author a book about Wisconsin words. ♦

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Volume VI *DARE* Quiz

U*h-oh! We got our data mixed up! Help us sort it out!* For each of these questions, one of the three *DARE* Informant responses belongs to a different question in this quiz. Figure out which one it is and write the correct question number on the line in front of it. Send answers along with your name and address to Julie Schnebly, 6119 Helen C. White Hall, 600 N. Park St., Madison, WI 53706. Your answers must reach us by May 15. If we receive more than one quiz with all the correct answers (or have a tie for the highest number of correct answers), we'll break the tie with a drawing. The winner will receive a signed copy of Volume VI, which includes these answers and many more ear-catching responses from the original *DARE* fieldwork. An answer key will appear in our next *Newsletter* and on our website, dare.wisc.edu. Good luck, and have fun! ♦

A23 *To do something at the very first try: "He got the right answer ____."*

- ___ First crack off the bat
- ___ Got it on tick
- ___ Quick as a sheep shakes his tail

B25 *Any joking names around here for a very heavy rain? You might say, "It's a regular ____."*

- ___ Goose-drencher
- ___ Scuttle of mud
- ___ Toad-strangler

C33 *What joking names do you have for an out-of-the-way place, or a very unimportant place?*

- ___ Squirrel Hollow
- ___ Water-buster
- ___ Wide place in the road

H74a *Different words for coffee according to how it's made—very strong:*

- ___ Belly-washer
- ___ Spoon stands up in it
- ___ Strong enough to kill a horse

U11 *If you buy something but don't pay cash for it, you might say, "I ____."*

- ___ Bought it on time
- ___ Feed the fish
- ___ Put it on the sleeve

V2b *About a deceiving person, or somebody that you can't trust, you might say: "I wouldn't trust him ____."*

- ___ As far as I could throw a bull by the tail
- ___ Behind a broomstraw
- ___ Where it doesn't snow

Z16 *A small child who is rough, misbehaves, and doesn't behave, you'd call him a(n) ____.*

- ___ Ankle-biter
- ___ Stinker
- ___ Wee nip

BB17 *Other words or expressions used around here for vomiting:*

- ___ Flash his cookies
- ___ Past the front gate
- ___ Upchuck

CC9 *Other words or expressions for hell: "That man is headed straight for ____."*

- ___ Back side of nowhere
- ___ Down under
- ___ Hades

EE29 *When swimmers are diving and one comes down flat onto the water, that's a ____.*

- ___ Belly-buster
- ___ One good frog-leap
- ___ Pancake

FF17 *Words meaning that people had a very good or enjoyable time: "We all had a ____ last night."*

- ___ Ball
- ___ Gas
- ___ Live wire

LL6a *A small, indefinite amount—for example, of cream: "I'll take just a ____ of cream in my coffee."*

- ___ Skosh
- ___ Smidgen
- ___ Wingding doodle

MM24 *Other expressions meaning 'a short distance': "The river is just a ____ from the house."*

- ___ Lickety-split
- ___ Stone's throw
- ___ Whoop and a holler

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The *Dictionary of American Regional English* is grateful for the support of these donors in 2012. Gifts were received by the *Dictionary of American Regional English* Fund and the Frederic G. Cassidy DARE Fund. Because this is a national project, it is particularly meaningful that gifts were received from supporters in twenty-four states and the District of Columbia (and friends in Canada and France as well). Please consider joining the ranks of DARE contributors in 2013. ♦

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