

LINGUISTIC GEOGRAPHY

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Linguistic geography is one of those border-line subjects that impinge on several allied fields. Primarily an analysis of linguistic phenomena as they appear in different geographical regions, it is often useful to the historian, especially if he is concerned with early settlements and movements of population. The sociologist may be interested in the trends of speech among groups representing different social strata or different generations, and the ethnologist who is trying to build up a complete picture of a racial unit must certainly include an account of its speech within the framework. But it has greatest importance for the philologist, because of the light that it frequently throws on past stages in the development of a language, either by the preservation of significant earlier forms or by affording, in untutored regional speech that is less subject to the inhibitions of the written language and other conservative cultural influences, striking evidence of processes parallel to those that have operated in the past in the so-called standard language.

The subject is a relatively modern one; systematic studies in this field started about 1880. Before this time there had been investigations of isolated dialects, especially in Germany, where as early as 1767 there was an attempt to compile a dictionary of certain dialectal forms of speech. But over a century passed before the idea of a dialect atlas came into being; this brings us to 1876, when Wenker began work on his Sprachatlas des deutschen Reiches. In the same year a similar enterprise was started in France by two scholars - Tourtoulan and Bringuier - who attempted to map out the boundaries between French and Provençal. Described by Gaston Paris as "deux vaillants et consciencieux explorateurs", they wandered from village to village and charted these two forms of speech, arriving at a fairly definite boundary line, with a transition zone, a kind of linguistic no-man's land, between the two territories. Their conclusions were published in 1876, but even a year earlier an effort had been made by the Italian Ascoli in his Schizzi francoprovençali to map out the linguistic boundaries of certain regions where France, Italy and Switzerland meet.

The above-mentioned German scholar Wenker worked on a much bigger plan than the French and Italian experts, and after five years' research produced six dialect maps of northern and middle Germany and an introduction. His work is a striking example of German industry and thoroughness and also illustrates the large-scale methods of these linguistic explorations. His questionnaire, consisting of forty short sentences intended to show certain features of pronunciation, was sent to 40,000 communities and he received over 44,000 answers. The information was often given by local teachers, a method that has obvious dangers. Too much reliance had to be placed on helpers, few of whom could be experts, and

the results were bound to be only approximations. The work was continued, however, by other scholars and the technique gradually improved until there are now over a thousand maps of German speech, showing clear lines of dialectal demarcation.

In 1902 two French investigators, Gilliéron and Edmont, brought out the first section of the Atlas linguistique de la France. This enterprise was carried out on quite different lines from those of Wenker. Gilliéron planned the work; Edmont visited 638 communities and in each one recorded phonetically a list of words, which was gradually increased until by 1900 it contained about 1400 items. Instead of the much larger number of communities used for the German investigation with consequent dependence on untrained or semi-trained observers, the Frenchmen preferred a smaller number of units, all of which were investigated by one expert. It was a choice between quantity and quality. Thus the French Atlas linguistique became the classic model for a scientific approach to linguistic geography and has inspired most of the subsequent work in this field. In 1908 it was followed by a work on Swiss dialects containing about eighty maps, on a smaller scale than either the German or French surveys, but of equal merit. In this Swiss project three scholars collaborated. There also exist a special atlas of the dialect of Normandy and one of certain Roumanian dialects. An Italian atlas and one of the Catalan tongue are in preparation, while the Scandinavian countries are active in the same direction. The Swedish atlas at the University of Upsala has a special Institute devoted to its activity with a staff of about a dozen workers, though they cover such fields as folklore as well as purely linguistic phenomena. Altogether about twenty atlases of various European regions have been or are being completed.

In England, with its strong tradition of individualism in scholarship, little has been done of a cooperative nature. There are isolated studies of individual dialects, some good--mostly the work of Continental, especially Scandinavian, scholars--others not so good, done by the well-meaning dilettante and the country gentleman. But there is no systematic planned account of English dialects as a whole, except for Joseph Wright's monumental Dialect Dictionary and Grammar, again the work of one individual, with many voluntary helpers. It is unfortunate that no plan to chart English dialects has been developed, as they are in danger of disappearing with the advent of the wireless and the cinema and with the spread of education, though there is still more genuine dialect left in Great Britain than the outsider imagines. But the survey, if it is to be made, should be made quickly. An organization on the lines of the survey of English place-names would serve well for dialect work; this should really have had priority over the place-name survey.

On this continent sporadic interest in linguistic geography was shown in the early part of this century by one or two American scholars, but no systematic effort was made to survey this problem

till 1921, when a group of the Modern Language Association explored the possibilities of research in this field. Later, in 1929, a definite scheme to investigate North American dialects was launched by the M.L.A. and the Linguistic Society of America. The project received the support of the American Council of Learned Societies, who suggested, in 1930, the possibility of "conducting an experimental investigation over a restricted geographical area, to serve as a demonstration of the method to be followed, and as a basis for further estimates for the requirements of the undertaking." Accordingly a scheme was drawn up to begin work on the New England dialects and the cooperation of the Council and of Yale and Harvard Universities was secured. After nearly ten years the first-fruits of this preliminary survey have been published - a Handbook and two volumes of charts containing 242 maps. There will ultimately be 730 of these New England maps, besides twenty-four charts of a more general nature, and this will form the first section of the Linguistic Atlas of United States and Canada. The number of communities investigated in New England was 213, chosen by a historian familiar with the early conditions of settlement. In each community two subjects were found, generally one elderly and one middle-aged person. The middle-aged informant frequently represented a somewhat higher cultural level than the 'old timer', who was usually of a less educated type, sometimes illiterate, thus reflecting, because of his age and his limited social and educational experience, a more definite regional pattern. In the towns a fairly cultured subject was also frequently chosen. The distance between communities was about fifteen miles in the more settled districts, with larger intervals in the less populated areas of Northern New England. The questionnaire used consisted of about 900 items, covering almost every aspect of ordinary life and organized so as to show up certain features of pronunciation, vocabulary, morphology and syntax. It is a formidable task to lead an elderly man or woman, often unused to any active degree of cerebration, through the maze of these questions and to record his or her replies in a minute phonetic alphabet. The interviews took anything from ten to twenty hours, naturally spread over several days. It can be well imagined that they called for tact and patience, nor is it surprising to learn that one informant suddenly became completely deaf during the course of the enquiry and another was inconsiderate enough to die. Fortunately his widow was willing to complete the answers. Each record is taken down in duplicate; one copy is kept by the investigator and the other stored at headquarters, at present Brown University, where the editorial work of the Atlas is done.

From these records the maps are made. First, the basic charts showing the actual term used to denote an object or an idea. Then from these maps certain features are selected which show considerable regional variety, and these variations, either of entire words or of sounds in the same word or of syntactical or morphological items, are charted by means of symbols. This gives a clearer picture of the distribution of any specific linguistic phenomenon. It

is rather like a weather chart; only instead of isobars and isotherms we have isolexes i.e., identical words; isophones, identical sounds; isomorphs, identical forms; isotaxes, identical syntactical features; and isosemes, identical meanings. A glance at these maps shows that fairly definite speech-belts will emerge when these features are plotted in this way. An attempt can then be made to correlate these with conditions of early settlements and movements of population and also with physical geographical features. The number of problems thus raised is very great and their solution must often be left to the expert in history or geography.

Last summer I undertook to begin work on the Canadian portion of the Atlas and was able to spend nearly six months in the Maritime Provinces, which seemed the logical place to start the investigation. The settlements here - especially in Nova Scotia - are generally older than in most other regions in Canada. They also show great variety in their racial origin, as a glance at the map published by the Department of the Interior in 1901 will indicate. This chart distinguished six racial groups - English, Irish, Scotch, French, German and Blacks - but this is really over-simplified from the point of view of the linguistic field-worker, as the English group has to be subdivided into a least three sub-groups, those who have migrated directly from England on the one hand, and those who came via the United States. The latter fall into two divisions, the pre-Loyalists and the later immigrants. A similar distinction must be drawn between Highland and Lowland Scots. The Blacks, too, are not homogeneous. Some were originally brought in as slaves by their American masters; others migrated directly from the West Indies. Nova Scotia thus offers a priori a promising field for dialect work and the results obtained from this preliminary survey are of great interest. It is only possible here to indicate briefly a few outstanding features.

The questionnaire used for the Maritimes was on a smaller scale than the New England list - containing about 500 instead of 900 items. These covered practically every aspect of ordinary life. Some of the headings were: the weather; parts of the house and farm; utensils, implements, vehicles; clothing and bedding; topography, roads; domestic and other animals; food, cooking, meals; trees, berries; family relationships; names and nicknames; parts of the body; personal characteristics; emotions; illness, death; social life and institutions; religion, superstitions.

In obtaining replies to questions on these topics one always had to guard against artificial, refined terms and pronunciations. It was obvious that a kind of linguistic double standard existed; one form of speech would be used in spontaneous conversation, another when responding to a direct enquiry. This holds good for most people's speech. To avoid this it is desirable to make as many notations as possible during the course of normal conversation; this is obviously much easier if a third person is present to direct the talk into suitable channels. But to obtain a complete

record in this way would take far too long, and many points have to be elicited by direct questioning. The two methods often produce quite different results. Thus an informant, when asked how he referred to his wife, would answer: "I call her my wife", and a few minutes later, when questioned about some domestic item, would reply in his normal idiom: "Oh, I must ask the woman about that". These double forms are both included in the record, but naturally more weight is attached to the spontaneous utterance. Pronunciation fluctuates in the same way; thus the same subject on one occasion pronounced sausages in the normal way and later, when off guard, said sassengers.

The same double usage is seen in euphemistic expressions. Here there is a great difference between men and women speakers. The names of the male animals are often avoided by women, or even by men when women are present. A man will freely use such term as bull, boar, ram; women often prefer expression which seem to them less crude. One old lady would not even mention the word bull; she insisted on spelling it. When pressed, she said that she might perhaps refer to "one of them big fellers". Among the other substitutions for this word were animal, gentleman (cow), top-cow, top-ox, ox, toro and society. Similar euphemisms were found for the term illegitimate child, which was often replaced by other expressions of a rather poetical and imaginative character.

Another widespread phenomenon was the influence of non-English languages on various dialects. In Lunenburg County there is a distinct German colouring, which affects vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation; in Pictou County, Antigonish and Cape Breton Island the speech is affected by Gaelic. Very little German is actually heard in Lunenburg, but the speech-basis of the older generation is much closer to German than English. They frequently have the German uvular r instead of the normal English r, they substitute d and t for the two th sounds of English, and they often use non-English idioms, such as "tik (=thick) of fog" (very foggy). Their calls to the animals differ from those found in other regions; the pigs, for instance, are summoned with a cry that is approximately woots, woots, woots or wootch, wootch, wootch. The Gaelic regions show parallel phenomena. Here many of the older speakers still use Gaelic as their normal tongue and English is a secondary language to them. They have difficulty in pronouncing many of the voiced consonants; v becomes f, z becomes s, the affricate sound of g becomes ch, and so on. Their Gaelic idiom is occasionally carried over into English, as, for instance, when they call the upper part of the house the loft; the word lobht, a Scandinavian loanword in Gaelic, means both the upper room or storey of a house as well as the upper part of a barn. They too have special calls for the animals; the sheep, which in many non-Gaelic districts is addressed as nannie, is called by these speakers with a word that is difficult to indicate with the ordinary spelling; it is sometimes kiry, sometimes a word not unlike the German Kirch(e); there is of course no connection here.

Transference of technical terms into everyday speech is also common. Thus, to express the idea of an accidental encounter, fishermen or sailors will often use the idiom: "I ran afoul of him". This does not mean a disagreeable meeting, but merely an unexpected one. A picturesque term in fishing communities is mug-up, meaning a snack. It also may originate from the language of the vessels.

Many interesting survivals of older English usage, in both vocabulary and pronunciation, can be detected. Thus one frequently hears weskit for waistcoat, fortnit for fortnight, deef for deaf, all well established in earlier English but giving way in modern times to pseudo-refined pronunciations based on the spelling. The modern cuffs is often wristbands, pronounced rizbands, the upper part of the house is often the chamber, the title Mrs. is sometimes still mistress, especially among speakers of Scottish origin.

The regional variation is often very striking. Thus the term seesaw shows at least eight variants, seesaw, tilt, teeter (board), tinter, tilting board, tippin board, and sawman. One may compare this with the uniformity shown by a group of younger speakers in Ontario, where twenty-two informants each use the one term teeter-totter for this object. Curiously enough, this compound did not appear once in the Nova Scotia material, though no doubt it exists there. For the term serenade, the rather riotous celebration that the members of a rural community stage outside the house of a newly-married couple, at least seven varieties were found: serenade, salute, celebrate, chivaree, shower, tin-panning and jamboree. There are probably others in existence.

In the field of semantics or change of meaning equally interesting phenomena can be observed. One striking feature is the widespread use of the word clever in the sense agreeable, amiable, hospitable, a meaning also recorded in New England dialects and in earlier English, e.g., Goldsmith's lines in She Stoops to Conquer: Then come, put the jorum about, and let us be merry and clever.

Even a brief glance at the material already collected in New England and Nova Scotia makes one doubtful about certain assumptions that are generally made with regard to linguistic developments. First the rate of change in the dialects is very slow; rural speakers are much more conservative than most people think, in spite of the influence of the school, the films, radio, and larger centres of population. Secondly, glib statements about the uniform pattern of North American life are not supported by an examination of the speech of this continent. The amount of variation between different communities and even between different terms for the earthworm we begin to realize that, although there may be standardization in our toothpastes and motor-cars, the more fundamental activity of human speech still reveals abundant variety and colour. It would be unfortunate if this should disappear.