Negro American Dialects: II
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Negro American Dialects

By Annie Weston Whitney

II

MOST of the distinct plantation dialects are found in South Carolina, whose people have been credited with more characteristic individuality than those of any other State. Certainly they are in many respects the most conservative. There are still in use at every session of the Legislature the heavy gold-headed mace, overtopped by its pointed crown, that was sent over for use by the colonial government, and the sword of state, with the king's monogram on the scabbard. Here, too, as in no other State, the presiding officers of the Legislature still appear in long velvet gowns, the one in various shades of purple, the other in different hues of blue.

Here the courtly gentleman of the old school still addresses a married woman as "Mistress Smith" or "Mistress Jones," as the case may be, and he in turn is copied by the negro.

The word *hair* and kindred words are still pronounced as spelled in the time of Chaucer. The dropping of the "u" in "honor" and its companion words, and the second "l" in such words as "traveler," has never been encouraged, tho the public schools have discontinued their use. Not many years ago a boy was corrected by his teacher for spelling "labor" with a "u." He was told he would be marked for spelling incorrectly.

"If I leave out the 'u,'" he said, "my father will switch me; if I put in it, you mark me. What am I to do?"

It is needless to say that the father was a stickler for the old *régime*.

This same "u" in "honor," "favor," etc., was at one time dropped in England, but restored to use in 1843.

It is surprising to find in this State, settled largely by Huguenots, so little of the French element in either language or customs. The French in Louisiana made a great effort to retain the language and customs of the mother country. Less than ten years ago there was but one magazine published in Louisiana, and that was entirely in French.

In South Carolina, on the contrary, the Huguenots, fleeing from persecution, were glad to adopt the language and customs of those among whom they found refuge. There has always been a large Scotch element in the northern part of the State, or the "Up-Country," as it is called, but this has had less influence on the negro dialect than the English and French elements of the Sea Islands,

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where the finest cotton in the world always has been and still is raised, and on the immense rice plantations of the coast.

The formation of these different and distinct dialects can be better understood when something is known of the life on the large plantations. Each was a little settlement of its own, having not only its separate church, but its hospital, for no sick negro was allowed to be cared for in his cabin. This hospital was visited every morning by the wife of the planter.

These negroes, bought at first in large quantities, remained for generations on the same plantation. The South Carolinian often bought, but rarely sold, a slave. The threat of being sent to Georgia, the great slave market of the South, was often sufficient to bring a refractory negro to terms. It was a common thing to free a slave in South Carolina and to provide for his future, but in many instances the negro would refuse his freedom. In Virginia at one time the laws were such that a negro could only be freed at birth, and there are instances of owners taking their slaves North to free them, and of the negro returning of his own free will. The slave looked down on the "free nigger" because he was debarred from free intercourse with the whites.

On the large rice plantations this intercourse started at a very early age, for there was always a large room where the children whose mothers were at work were cared for by women too old to work out; and this room the mistress from the "big house" overlooked and visited daily. These rooms had large open fires, before which sweet potatoes were always roasting, these being given the children *ad libitum*.

On Sunday mornings every child on the plantation was brought before the "Master" for inspection, and those who met the requirements in neatness or cleanliness in dress and appearance were rewarded with a bit of candy, a piece of cake, or something equally desirable.

Beginning at this early age to note every word, movement and gesture of the master and the master's family, it is no wonder that we find in later life the negro with the dignity and courtly manners of a past generation.

It is almost needless to mention the fact that the maids, body-servants, and house servants generally, whose number was legion, considered it one of their privileges to copy the people at the "big house" and be in turn copied by the field hands. It is mentioned to call attention to the effect it had on the dialect of the plantation; for, as Professor William Dwight Whitney says that every family within itself has its own spoken dialect, so these family individualities, being accentuated by the imitative negro, became prominent factors in forming the dialects, or in creating distinctive features on the different plantations.

It will be said that the dialects the negroes brought with them were not all alike. True, but as it is being shown now that the negroes from different parts of Africa were not so different as at one time believed, so the dialects were similar in many respects. There is a tendency with all of them, for instance, to begin words with the double consonants, as *ng, nk, nd,* etc., with a still stronger tendency to end them with vowels, as shown in the quotation already given from the story of Cinderella. This latter tendency is noticeable in many of the Negro-American dialects.

Now, let us look for a moment at the influence these distinctive dialects have had on the speech of the whites brought up among them.

A white child, often one of a family of twelve, fourteen and even sixteen, was necessarily left largely to the care of the old negro "mauma." This "mauma" had been carefully selected and trained and felt it her privilege to oversee and correct the manners and even the speech of her charges. She knew perfectly well what was correct in both. Her own dialect might consist largely of words and expressions once proper for the master, but now given up by him; she would recognize the difference, and any signs of falling into the dialect form of speech would be met with:

"Dat no way fer white chile talk."

The plantation jingles, songs and melodies, with their quaint dialects, made so slight an impression on the white child that his memory has retained but scant and hazy traces of them. This, of course, does not include the minstrel songs, they bearing but slight resemblance to the genuine negro ones. Great attention was paid to the education of these children;

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tutors were carefully selected, and the libraries on the plantations were exceptionally fine, classic writers being largely represented. Yale was the favorite college in this country, and there the Southerner was thrown largely with companions from his own section of the country.

On this conservative State more national honors have been heaped than on any of the original States except, perhaps, Virginia. And where do we find more finished speeches, more forcible language or a more beautiful use of words than among our Southern orators before the war?

Nor was this education confined to the men. A Southern woman prided herself on her familiarity with the classics. She was brought up on them and studied Shakespeare almost as carefully as her Bible.

The literary language of the cultured Southerner is as pure and beautiful as that of the cultured man in any other part of the country. If he chooses conservatism in speech, where others are more radical, who shall criticise?

Samuel Pegge, Esq., writing in 1844, of the dialects of England, claims that they are survivals, and in his reproof to the Londoner for the way in which he looks on them, says:

"Most people admire family plate, but family language must be melted down and modernized."

Until we have a settled standard in this country, there will be differences of speech even among cultured people. Language undergoes no physical change; it only changes at the will of man. Professor Whitney again claims that we, in our conservatisms, are as much in the right as England in her changes; that we have too long accepted the inferior position and that through our literature we have won the right to share in forming a definite standard.

Purists, such as Richard Grant White, who claim that "everything purely American in language is bad," are liable to subject themselves to ridicule by following the English standard too closely; words in general use in the two countries having totally different meanings. An American would hardly say that he "was all knocked up," and he was going to take a "second-class carriage" with as little "luggage" as possible.

Of dialect in literature, it is hardly necessary to say more than that without it certain phases of life could not be depicted. A typical story of Southern life could not be given with the negro left out; and he could not be portrayed without his form of expressing his thoughts and ideas. They are not only an important but an interesting part of him. This is forcibly proved by an attempt to read a dialect story with the dialect left out. One would hardly attempt a second one.

In writing dialect, it is as important to be thoroughly familiar with the particular kind to be represented as it is to be well informed before writing a scientific article.

"Some critics hold that it is more difficult to write a perfect dialect story than one in classic English. The art is higher, being more complex."

And yet some of our best writers make attempts at it that seriously injure what might otherwise be good work. As notable examples of this, we have Howell's Virginia dialect in "A Hazard of New Fortunes," and Brander Matthews's Baltimore dialect in "The Royal Marine." It is surprising that Brander Matthews, a Southerner, should have attempted a dialect he quickly shows he knows very little of.

It is perhaps clever to call the Baltimore girls the "terrapin girls," but he fails to give his heroine the speech of the "terrapin girls." Her pronunciation of the word "Baltimaw" would be more nearly correct if the "w" were left off.

When she says:

"I don't like her right much;" "She's very clever, if she is o'nery," and when she talks about "old friends in the So'th," and says "on the po'ch" she is using a speech totally distinct from anything in use among the "terrapin girls."

When she says, "My aunt allows it's goin' to rain," she uses what belongs to the New England dialects, and what, when found in use among the Southern whites, is found only in the dialects of the "po' buckra."

Our present system of education is the greatest enemy of dialect. Let us then cherish what we have in literature, for it will soon be too late to collect more; and it is among those who use it that we find the real pathos of life, and often its great beauties, before conventionalities

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have come and covered them with a cloak. Without this literature, what would the world know of the quiet New England life, of the Hoosier, the Creole, the sturdy Mountaineer, or of plantation life? Would we give up Uncle Remus and his animal tales?

It is to be regretted that many valuable folk-tales are sinking into oblivion because of the difficulty of understanding those from whom they could be obtained. An attempt is now being made to study these dialects, through which many valuable contributions are yet to be given to the folk-lorist, throwing rays of light on the history of past ages, and in many cases helping to prove the wonderful theory of the unity of man.

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