Negro American Dialects

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I

IT is unfortunate that in this age of scientific investigation so little attention has been paid to the study of our negro American dialects. Not only are they of importance to the philologist; they have their value historically, socially and politically.

It is again unfortunate that the opportunity for study will soon be gone, for they have left no graven tablets, few written records, and are fast fading from the memory of man.

Comparatively few of these dialects have found their way into print, partly owing to the difficulty of reproducing them phonetically, but largely to the fact that if so reproduced, they would be perfectly unintelligible to the great mass of the reading public. This has been a strong factor in strengthening many erroneous impressions that have gone abroad, not only regarding the dialects themselves, but the influence they have had on the language of the Southern white man.

Until quite recently it was the general belief, outside the slave States, that negro dialect was the same throughout the South. Again, any peculiarity of speech among educated whites at the South is still currently believed to be due to contact with the negro, especially in early life. In many instances this is simply the old question of the mote and the beam. These two impressions are all with which we propose to deal in this paper.

Some six or seven years ago a Louisiana woman went North and read in what she chose to call "Plantation Dialect." It was a revelation to those who heard her. Even now it is not generally known that in some parts of the South, "befo' de wah," every large plantation had its own individual dialect. So distinct were these that a planter, by engaging a negro in conversation, could tell at once who was his owner, or, as he would be likely to express it, whether he belonged to Poshee, Indian Field, Woodlawn, Saracen's, Mexico, etc., these being the names of some of the plantations where the dialects were distinct.

The negro dialect with which the world is most familiar is that of Uncle Remus. The South Carolinian says Uncle Remus is so stupid he cannot read it. In the first place he says "the dialect is all wrong," and then, "he never tells the whole of the story;" then, "our old Maumas would act it all out so that we could *see* Bra' Rabbit or Bra' Fox run right before us."

In his introduction to Uncle Remus, Joel Chandler Harris notes the fact that the dialect on the rice plantations differs somewhat from that which he uses, and gives some examples; but as the dialects vary, so do the animal tales themselves, becoming very elaborate in other States.

The Virginia dialect, with which the reading public has grown familiar, belongs to but one part of the State. The eastern and western parts furnish different dialects. In some parts of Georgia it was not uncommon for the negro to

have two dialects; one for his own race, the other for the white.

Here are a few specimens of negro dialect that may be of interest. The first is pure African taken from the story of Cinderella in Heli Chatelain's "Folk Tales of Angola:"

"She knocks a box on the ground; out come soldiers; out comes a carriage; out come two slave girls; out comes a band. Nga Maria enters the carriage the (band of) music behind; they go up to church."

"Uvunda kalubunga boxi; mu iza masoladi; mu iza kaluaji; mu iza akama kiladi; mu iza mujika: Nga Madia u di longa mu kaluaji; mujika kudirna — kati mu ngeleja."

The next specimen is negro French, in which there is no distinction of gender, *la* being always singular and *ye* plural, with other corresponding peculiarities. The sentence chosen is from Alcée Fortier's "Louisiana Folk Tales:"

"There was once a young girl who had a lover. It was a fine young man, a prince; but the father did not want him to court his daughter."

"Yavé inne fois inne jene fille qui té gagnin inne l'amoureux cété inne bel jene nomme inne prince, mé papa li té pas oulé jene nomme té fé l'amour."

The Sea Islander says:

"*Coom bwoy see coo in de w-a-a-k.*"
"Come boy see the cow in the walk."

An old nurse in South Carolina used to say:

"Coom Mass Henry, coom, let's tak light and go pin tap."
"Come Master Henry, come, let's take a light and go up stairs."

A writer in a recent number of one of our periodicals has denounced in unqualified terms the use of "ob" for of, "bery" for very, "dis and dat," "brack," etc., by writers of negro dialect. Not only are they all common expressions, but we find "bittle" for victuals, and *dis* and *dat* are contracted, as, for example, "Enty da so?" Isn't that so?

The dialects on the Sea Islands and on some parts of the coast of South Carolina are so unintelligible that it is necessary to have interpreters in the Charleston courts. These people have lived more to themselves and have been brought in contact less with the whites than others, and we find their dialect purer African. Some are still living there who came over in the last slave ship.

In view of the fact that there are so many dialects and that the Southerner was brought up largely by and among people using them, it might seem strange not to find many genuine negro expressions in use among the whites. Do we find them?

Judging from a magazine article published some time since, entitled "Saturated with Dialect," it would seem as tho no good thing in language could come from those living surrounded by dialects. The article was an attempt to denounce and ridicule the dialect story and professed to be the experience of a mother and son who had been reading a current number of one of our periodicals in which there were three dialect stories. They represented distinct types, and yet the readers find themselves addressing each other as "we-uns" and "you-uns," a thing the negro would scorn to do, tho he hear it continually.

The negro looks down on the "po' white trash" or "po' buckra," as he calls him, "buckra" being pure African for white man. This includes the poor mountaineer, the sandhiller, the cracker, the clay-eater, etc. He lives better, dresses better and considers himself better educated than they, and does not imitate those on whom he looks down.

"Po' buckra and dog run de same way," expresses his feelings of contempt for these people.

On the contrary, the po' buckra of the Carolinas, when brought in contact with the negro, looks up to him as a superior being, "Maams" and "Misters" and "Sirs" him and copies portions of his language.

This is interesting and valuable in helping to prove that real dialect is never formed by those of a higher education taking from those of a lower. If not the reverse of this, it is almost certain to prove a conservative survival.

Carelessness of speech causes vulgarisms in language, and we find everywhere, among the most cultivated people, provincialisms, or colloqualisms and idioms. These are distinct from real dialect.

The educated or cultured man, in taking words from others, copies them exact, while the unlettered one mispronounces and perverts the use of words he takes into his vocabulary. The Charlestonian, for instance, will invite a friend to eat "cooter" with him, "cooter" being pure African for terrapin. The negro will ask for "sassafac" tea.

A negro boy was in the habit of giving his name as "Nedicudinezza Beltikedishazza Sham Ham Jafac Maxwell Brown," mispronouncing nearly every word.

The sound of words has a great attraction for the negro, and he uses them regardless of their meaning.

A negro woman was with difficulty prevented from naming her child "Crucifix," the sound of the word attracting her.

A negro preacher in a sermon declared emphatically:

"I comes not to contaminate any other sect"—repeated still more emphatically —"I comes not to contaminate any other sect, I comes to exhonorate your minds."

The peculiar adaptation of words is illustrated by the following incident:

A Northern woman calling on a friend in Georgia soon after the war, was very much puzzled by being asked at the door for her "trimmins." The servant refused to admit her without them, saying decidedly that the mistress wanted her "trimmins." The lady at last became indignant, but the friend on whom she wished to call fortunately appeared and told her that the servant was only asking for her name. Before the war, she explained, the negroes there had no surnames, being known only by their given names, often with some personal peculiarity added, to distinguish them from others of the same name. After the war they were obliged to give themselves surnames, and these they called their "trimmins."

Where then, might be asked, does the Southerner get what are called his peculiarities of speech, so strangely like some of the negro dialects?

When our colonists came to this country they brought with them what was then a wealth of literature or written language, almost entirely classic. This soon became the language of the country, and through it many words and expressions that have been dropped in the mother country have been retained here, noticeably by the conservative Southerner. From him the negro formed his dialect and being, in turn, more conservative than his master, has retained longer the older forms of speech.

In the early days of the Virginia colony the field negro worked side by side with the bondsmen, who far outnumbered him, and from them took many words and phrases that have simplified his dialect, as it were, making it more intelligible to the outsider than many of the others.

A few instances will serve to give some idea of this conservatism:

"Obleeged" was perfectly correct fifty years ago.

"Haunts" for ghosts, called "Harnts" by the negro, is Shakespearean.

The double comparative and double superlative, for which the negro shows such fondness, is classic:

"More sharper than your words."—*Henry V.*
"The most unkindest cut of all."—*Hamlet.*
"Most boldest" and "Most unkindest."—*Julius Cæsar.*
"Most heaviest."—*Two Gentlemen of Verona.*
"The sun has rose."—*Swift.*
"Jes' holp ter empty dat bar'l."—*Negro.*
"He holp the Heavens to rain."—*King Lear.*
"Gimme dat handkercher."—*Negro.*
"I knit my handkercher about her brows."—*As You Like It.*
"Hit" for "it" is old Anglo-Saxon.
"Dat's de ruination er de chile."—*Negro.*
"I will ruinate my father's house."—*Henry V.*
"Bless dat 'oman!"—*Negro.*
"'Oman, forbear."—*Merry Wives of Windsor.*
"I reck'n yer mought."—*Negro.*

"Within the postern stood Agantes stout
To rescue her if ill mote her betide."
—*Translation of Tasso.*

"Moe" for more.—*Sixteenth Century.*
"Heaps of things."—*Old English.*
"Writ" and "wrote" for "written."—*Old English.*

"Axe" for "ask" was used by old writers from Chaucer down.

The word "tote" has been more written about than any other Southern word, opinions being divided as to whether it is of English or African origin. The Dialect Society claims that there is no trace of it in New England, but those who have lived there say that it belongs to the dialect with which they are familiar; and there are variations of the word still in use there. It is a word in common use among the poor whites at the South, where there has been no contact with the negro. It is nouns, not verbs, that come into our language from Africa.

A charade written in the early part of this century is interesting here, as showing the use and misuse of words:

"My first is a little thing vot hops *Sparrow*
My second brings us good hay crops *Grass*
My whole I eats with mutton chops." *Sparrow-grass*
—*Vulgarly called* "*Asparagus.*"

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(Concluded next week.)