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Dictionary of American Regional English

In the 1930s and 40s, ethnomusicologist John Lomax and his family traveled the American South to document folk songs, blues music, and field hollers. The recordings of these distinct cultural expressions formed a substantial portion of the then-new Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress.

In a similar vein, from 1965 to 1970, lexicographer Frederic G. Cassidy and a team of 80 fieldworkers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison visited a thousand communities in all 50 states to capture the varied regional dialects of American English. This survey of about 3,000 people, who answered more than 1,600 questions about the words and phrases they used in their daily lives, is the basis for the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (*DARE*). Originally published as six print volumes between 1985 and 2013, a complete online version was also launched in 2013.

The digital *DARE* is a delightful documentation of, and homage to, the regional variation of the English language in the United States. It excludes words commonly used throughout the country, resulting in "the full panoply of American regional vocabulary—from Adam's housecat to Zydeco." In addition to the survey, entries have been gathered from other oral as well as print sources, including the newsletter of the *American Dialect Society*, books, and newspapers.

Unlike many e-resources, *DARE* has a standard web address (*www.daredictionary.com*) and looks look like a general web resource rather than a traditional research database. Access to the dictionary requires a subscription but much of the site, along with 100 sample entries (of approximately 60,000 total), is accessible to nonsubscribers. Digital *DARE* opens with a clean, intriguing homepage with three primary features: a search bar, a distorted U.S. map (more on that below), and a scrolling sidebar that displays an alphabetical list of 15 entries at a time.

These are, helpfully, also the three primary ways to search *DARE*. The search bar includes a link for Advanced Search, with a dropdown menu of search options—Full Text, Abstract, Headword, Variant, Definitions, Etymologies, Quotations, Part of Speech, Social Label, Region (Full Text)— as well as optional Boolean operators. *DARE* calls the scrolling sidebar the "word wheel," which "replicates the serendipity of browsing a print dictionary." Each time the homepage is opened or refreshed, a new word is highlighted in the word wheel:
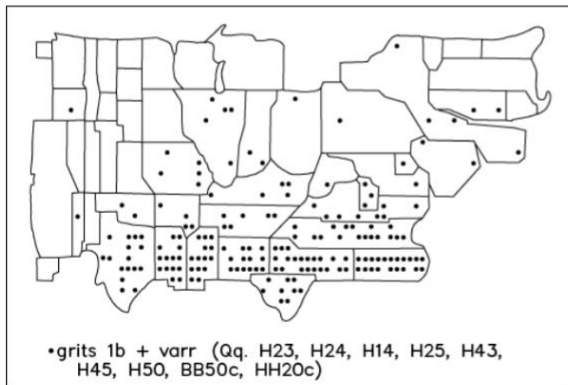- Calf-rope, holler, *v phr*, Esp in children's games: to give in, surrender; to capitulate. Also *call calf-rope, cry ~ say ~ yell ~* (chiefly South Midland, Gulf States)
- Quill pig, *n*, =porcupine. Also *quill cat, ~ hog, quilly* (chiefly North, esp Northeast)
- Hell-for-leather, *adv*, At top speed, in great haste. Also *hell-bent for leather* (scattered, but esp West)
- Summer complaint, *n*, 1) A severe gastrointestinal infection esp of children in summertime; broadly, diarrhea. 2) Fig: a summer vacationer, esp an annoying one. coastal Maine, Cape Cod Massachusetts

The *DARE* map, used throughout the dictionary to illustrate where particular words are used, warps the shape of the 50 states so to "represent population density from 1965-1970, instead of land area." The Resources page has a more robust explanation ("the map is distorted to reflect
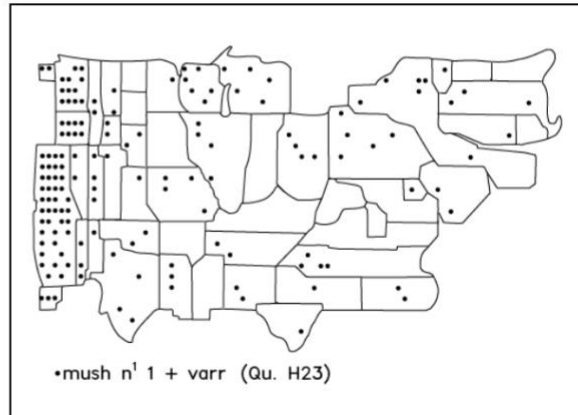
the number of *DARE* informants in each state, this number being roughly proportional to the state populations as of the 1960 census") and reasoning (each of the 1,002 surveyed communities is represented uniformly across the map, which "makes it easier to see the clustering of the communities where a given response is recorded").
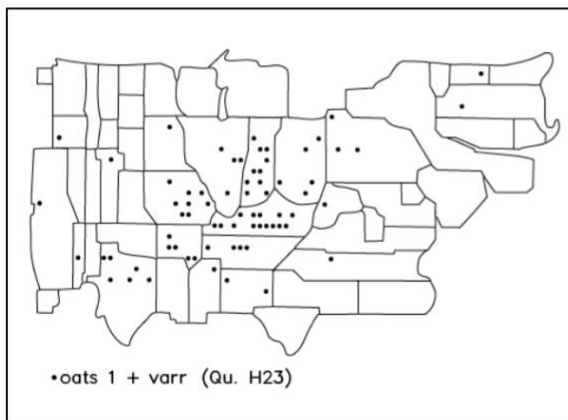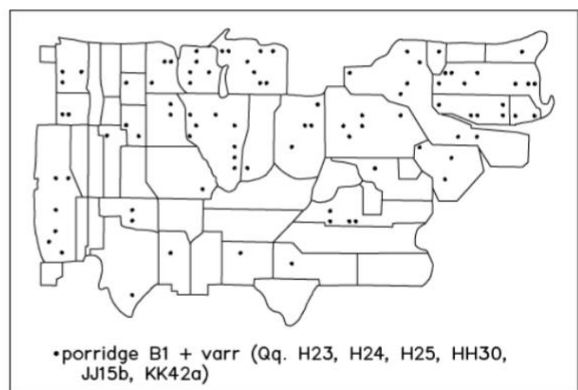
Cooked cereal

grits

•grits 1b + varr (Qq. H23, H24, H14, H25, H43, H45, H50, BB50c, HH20c)

mush

•mush n¹ 1 + varr (Qu. H23)

oats

•oats 1 + varr (Qu. H23)

porridge

•porridge B1 + varr (Qq. H23, H24, H25, HH30, JJ15b, KK42a)

On the homepage, the map can be interacted with in two ways: clicking individual states or choosing from a dropdown list of linguistic regions. "Okefenokee" includes only small pieces of Florida and Georgia; the "Mississippi Valley" spans more than eight entire states.

Any of these search methods brings up a list of relevant dictionary entries; clicking one loads the full entry in a new page. Each entry includes the headword with the part-of-speech; any variants; the etymology, if available; a regional label (e.g., chiefly New England); a social label (e.g., somewhat old-fash); the definition(s); and quotations from both bibliographic references and the *DARE* questionnaire. The digital version also includes the treat of audio recordings from the original DARE survey tapes.

Befitting its subject matter, *DARE* is clearly meant for a general audience. The interface is intuitive to navigate and well-organized; many of the quotations listed in each entry come from major newspapers, novels, and popular magazines. Users can choose to print, e-mail, or save and add annotations to each entry (this requires a separate account if using an institutional subscription). The How-to, FAQ, and Resources pages are thorough and clear.

While, smartly, the dictionary is placed front and center, the site is actually divided into two tabs. The other is for the DARE Survey itself. This is another area where the digital version surpasses the print. There users can view the full 1,600-question survey (available only in Vol. VI of the print edition) as well as view, and download in spreadsheet form, each informant's answer. In the Size, Quantity, and Number category, for example, question LL5 reads: "Something impressively big: 'That cabbage is really a _____.'" "Giant," "humdinger," "monster," and "whopper" are the most popular of the 1,229 recorded answers.

In almost every sense the digital version is more robust than the print version. However, some background information published in the front matter of the first printed volume is missing online. Digital *DARE* includes an excerpt of the print introduction—describing, for example, the development of the questionnaire and the impact of advances in computer processing on the fieldwork analysis. Other portions are missing, though, including one explaining that "there has been no bowdlerizing or expurgation" for coarse or offensive phrases (Vol. I, xvii). This seems like an odd point to leave out of the digital edition considering, for instance, *DARE* includes over 100 definitions that begin with the N-word. The digital version would be a good place to expand upon rather than edit down the printed version. Additionally, much more information about the project is available at another site maintained by the University of Wisconsin-Madison (*dare.wisc.edu*), but it doesn't seem to be linked anywhere. Especially considering that next year is the fiftieth anniversary of the survey's conclusion, further explaining and contextualizing the survey (both its strengths and limitations) would be useful. These additions on history, methodology, and intentions to the digital version would better serve scholarly (and extra curious) digital users.

The internet, urbanization, and other homogenizing impacts along with demographic changes (the U.S. in 1970 was about 87% white while DARE survey participants were 92.7% white) means that regional language has also shifted dramatically. The site does note updates, including entirely new entries, completed in 2017 and 2019. Hopefully the dictionary will continue to be revised and expanded.

A fascinating dive into colloquial, slangy, and conversational English, *DARE* should be an enduring, and perhaps evolving, resource.