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The Idea of Appalachian Isolation

When it created the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the 1930s, the National Park Service decided to document the traditional life of the area.[1] In 1937 it commissioned a young graduate student from Columbia University named Joseph Sargent Hall to visit the coves and homesteads of the North Carolina and Tennessee mountains, which were in the process of being depopulated, to record the speech and music of people in the Smoky Mountains. Working through local Civilian Conservation Corps camps, Hall began collecting material from natives of what was one of the more rugged sections of Southern Appalachia. His approach to collection was very informal: he asked few questions and recorded whatever people wanted to say or sing. The result was that he collected many lengthy stories, especially about bear hunting, and a wide variety of music.[2] At one session a woman sang several traditional Child ballads. After finishing "Lord Thomas," she rendered "Come All You Young Ladies" to the untraditional tune of "On Top of Old Smoky." Shortly thereafter, she sang "Come All You Texas Rangers."

The third song clearly did not originate in Appalachia, and as likely as not its singer learned it from the radio. The contrast between modern and traditional images in this episode strikes a familiar chord with those who study Appalachia. They can probably all identify similar cases, no matter what part of the region they're from or what their field of study. Such contrasts have been part of mountain life for a long time.

Despite the many complexities and inconsistencies that confront objective observers, commentators from outside Appalachia have long been inclined, often seemingly compelled, to see mountain people en masse and to view mountain culture as homogeneous and uniform. Their motivation ranged from a desire to recount sensational accounts of violence and feuding to a not-unbenign hope to explain the mountains to fellow outlanders. But when they apply broad labels like "Appalachia" and "Southern Highlands" based on experience with only a few people or with individual communities, as is

often done, commentators produce false and misleading ideas about what does or does not characterize the culture and language of Appalachia people.

A classic instance involves Horace Kephart's *Our Southern Highlanders*.[3] Kephart, a remarkably keen observer, was far more sympathetic to mountain people than many writers before or after him and wanted to give them their due. At the same time he often doubted that he understood mountaineers well enough to write about them. Scholars of the region are much indebted for the detailed record on many subjects he left behind.[4] His chapter "Mountain Dialect" was the first thorough treatment of mountain speech and the only one for another two decades. The problem is that Kephart's commentary was based largely on from experiences in one remote area in the southwestern corner of the Smokies, an upper branch of Hazel Creek, Swain County, North Carolina, where he lived from 1904 to 1907. Since he almost never qualified his statements, however, readers have naturally assumed that they applied to the entire southern highlands, as his title suggested. Some words he cited have been attested in no other study of mountain speech or in any reference work. Today we cannot know whether the verb *block* "to blockade, make moonshine" and the noun *bumblings* "cheap whiskey," among many others, were at the turn of the twentieth century localized to one small area or instead were more widely current in the mountains and merely unrecorded by others. From 1908 to 1910 Kephart traveled about the southern mountains to gauge how typical his Hazel Creek experience was, but in the end he presented as typical much that was rare and exotic from those earlier years.

Kephart's theme and that of many others to the present day is that mountain speech differs from that elsewhere in preserving far more archaic forms. The routine explanation for this is that the long-term geographical or physical "isolation" of mountain people has caused their language and culture to lag behind other parts of the country, even, according to some writers, to be little changed from the days of Shakespeare or Chaucer. President William Goodell Frost of Berea College often made this claim, citing such terms as *holp* "helped," *beastes* "beasts," and *feisty* "impertinent."[5] In scholarly and popular literature on mountain speech, the vague and simplistic treatment of the concept of isolation remains prevalent, as does the notion that Southern Appalachia is a region suspended in time. Many readers of

Kephart's book have considered his century-old account to be still valid for a large part of the mountains; in fact, one recent commentator called traditional speech the "secret language" of the region.[6] An early statement about the effects of isolation came from the novelist John Fox, Jr.:

> In the march of civilization westward, the Southern mountaineer has been left in an isolation almost beyond belief. He was shut off by mountains that blocked and still block the commerce of a century, and there for a century he has stayed. He has had no navigable rivers, no lakes, no coasts, few wagon roads, and often no roads at all except the beds of streams. He has lived in the cabin in which his grandfather was born, and in life, habit and thought he has been merely his grandfather born over again.[7]

Very similar, if usually less extreme, statements can be cited from every decade of this century. In one recent monograph on Appalachian speech, three professional linguists (Christian, Wolfram, and Dube) state that

> Historically the physical environment has been a very important determining factor in the development of [Appalachia]. Although the geographical isolation of the past has been overcome to a large extent with modern transportation, evidence of this historical isolation remains.[8]

The reasons to be troubled by such statements are many, perhaps the greatest being the very ease with which writers leap from what they see as the physical separation and remoteness of communities to strong, usually unqualified claims about cultural traits having been preserved throughout the mountains. Nowhere has this been more true than for language study, where isolation has long been used by amateur philologists and antiquarians to account for the apparent archaicness of mountain speech. Professional linguists have often accepted this view without scrutiny and have routinely invoked it as the only determining factor for the character of mountain speech, one that is extremely powerful and altogether

sufficient to account for any archaisms. Linguists rarely qualify their use of the term either, and Christian et al.'s statement is little improvement over many earlier ones, since isolation is the only factor external to language that the authors cite. They do not, for example, discuss the nature of mountain society or the functions of language in mountain families and communities.

However, linguists must move beyond simplistic, static constructs like "isolation" that provide little insight into the culture of mountain and other peripheral communities and that all too often perpetuate stereotypes. The remainder of this essay seeks to come to grips with how linguists, among others, have used isolation to account for the character of Appalachia culture and speech. In particular it examines implications of how they have used the construct and considers how they might formulate it in a more valid way. Toward the end it will offer a modest proposal for revising the construct.

The literature on Appalachian speech reveals themes persisting for over a century. Most commonly mountain English is said to be old (of Elizabethan, Chaucerian, or other "ancient" vintage); to be pungent and direct; and to be creative and innovative. These qualities are of course neither absolute nor mutually exclusive, but they have often been highlighted by commentators not native to the mountains, who in the process make implicit comparisons to their own speech, the habits of middle-class, usually urban speakers from their own backgrounds.

For over a decade I labored on a dictionary of southern mountain English that draws primarily on material from the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee.[9] In the process of this work I sometimes tried to gauge the consistency of the dictionary's contents with themes and images of Appalachian speech, including the ones mentioned earlier. As I see it, there are at least four problems raised by the frequent statements in the literature attributing the distinctiveness of mountain speech to isolation.

First, isolation is rarely defined, except in the vaguest way. If we reflect on it, isolation may refer to a condition that is physical (involving proximity to other communities, especially cities), sociological (involving the frequency and variety of contact with other communities), economic (involving limited exchange of goods, services, and ideas with other communities), psychological (involving the orientation

and affinity of one community toward others, attachment by people to their own culture, and openness to change), cultural (involving the maintenance of distinctive practices and beliefs), or even technological. No doubt these types of isolation are often related, even reinforcing. One's isolation may also involve the extent of one's economic dependence or self-sufficiency, as well as access to media (not a new factor by any means: before television there was radio and before that, newspapers). Apparently most outside commentators mean isolation in the physical sense of remoteness (i.e. distance from urban areas or difficulty of access for the writer), but they either conflate physical isolation with infrequency of contact (i.e. social isolation) or assume that it automatically produces other types of isolation, though there is no necessary relationship between proximity and contact, receptiveness to change, etc. While often invoking the concept of isolation, linguists have yet to define it in a way that is sociologically sustainable (based on criteria that are valid and measurable), or anthropologically sensitive (involving analysis of a community on its own terms and based on community perceptions and behavior, i.e. what is remoteness for the investigator may not be perceived as such by residents).

Second, however poorly or implicitly "isolation" has been defined, Appalachian historians have questioned its validity on several grounds. Their work, which linguists seem never to have considered, includes Durwood Dunn's account of Cades Cove, Tennessee, within the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.[10] Now presented as having been a sparsely settled, remote community, the cove was actually a thriving settlement of several hundred people with strong market ties to Maryville (the county seat not much more than a dozen miles away) and Knoxville. In fact, few mountain communities lacked regular economic networks; very often they were settled from and were an economic extension of the valley below.

Gene Wilhelm, who has written cogently on the point, has argued that "the idea that the Appalachian mountains acted as a physical barrier, either for the people living within the mountain region, or for those individuals trying to cross them, hardly stands up against the evidence at hand" and that "the Appalachian region has been an admixture of cultural contact and socioeconomic enterprise rather than a bastion of isolated individuals and a slow sequence of economic development as previously

depicted in the literature."[11] One might question the applicability of his contentions, based as it is on research in the northern Blue Ridge of Virginia scarcely a hundred miles from Washington, D.C., but many of them echo an important essay published in 1913 about southwestern Virginia, more than two hundred miles farther into the mountains.[12]

The few historians of Appalachia that linguists cite with any regularity are those who discuss the region's founding period, and these are apt to give a simplistic view of the principal groups in the region and to gloss over the formidable numbers of people passing through Appalachia before the Civil War (which suggests fluid speech communities in many places in the early days). Historians have painted a picture of Appalachia as surprisingly that was diverse in more recent times — for example, documenting nineteenth and early-twentieth century industrialization (such as logging and mining, both of which brought extensive railroads) that came to many places and brought people of Italian, African, Irish, and other ancestries first to work and then to stay.[13] How much of an influence did they have on mountain culture and speech and how much of a model for others did they form? Would they not have caused the language to diversify from area to area? Would not the presence of the Cherokee in western North Carolina have left an imprint on the English language there? Unfortunately, very little is known about the historical diversity of the English of Appalachia, in part because linguists, with one or two exceptions, have yet to become acquainted with the work of not only historians, but also sociologists and anthropologists on diffusion theory, identity formation, ethnicity, and a host of other subjects.

Linguists are, perhaps like many specialists, a bit naive about the scholarly literature outside their own discipline. They tend to bring to the study of mountain speech models of analysis based on socio-economic variables that are often not informed by the structure of mountain communities. The most prominent paradigm for analyzing social variation in language works within an urban context using variables such as socioeconomic status and social class, which are based on occupation, education, and income level.[14] But these variables have little usefulness in differentiating social groups in small, rural communities and little, if any, psychological or social reality in the mountains. They tell us little about speech communities there.

Third, writers (especially linguists) usually treat isolation as an absolute condition, even though it is an inherently relative one varying from place to place; in other words, they never ask, "isolated as compared to what or where?" To my knowledge, only historians Gene Wilhelm for Blue Ridge Virginia and David Hsiung and Durwood Dunn for East Tennessee have recognized the relativity of isolation.[15] Isolation can be discussed in only the crudest and most inconsistent way if not formalized or operationalized (is it one variable or many?) to enable comparison of one community's isolation with another's.

With regard to physical isolation, individuals in any community will differ radically in their duration, type, and frequency of contact with outsiders, as some individuals (such as school teachers, store keepers, clergymen, etc.) will have much more contact with the larger culture. However much or little mountain people may have traveled, that is only one dimension of their contact.

Is there reason to think that rural communities in Appalachia are much more isolated than ones, for instance, in the Carolina Piedmont or along the Carolina coastal plain? Without a method for calculating a community's isolation, linguistic patterns that are prevalent in Appalachia, the region that is supposed to exemplify isolation, are often taken to be distinctively Appalachian when a more searching, comparative account would almost certainly find them not nearly so unusual. And without such a method, we cannot break the circularity in reasoning that isolation produces differences and differences prove isolation.

The Christian et al. study mentioned earlier four grammatical features in Appalachian and Ozark English (their investigation based on two counties in West Virginia and one in Arkansas): completive *done* (as "He done took off"); *a*-prefixing (as "He come a-runnin' out there"), non-standard verb principal parts, and non-standard subject-verb agreement. All of these are common throughout the South in the speech of both blacks and whites,[16] a fact that renders questionable the description "geographically isolated" in their title.[17] Historical isolation, which they call a "determining factor," does not evidently correlate with the language found in their West Virginia and Arkansas sites.

Fourth, however implicitly they define isolation, commentators mistake an observation about an

individual community for an explanation for whatever distinctiveness is found in it or, even more problematical, in the mountains in general. It is, or should be, a long way from an adequate observation to an adequate description, and at least as far again to an adequate explanation, if we ever arrive at one at all. Outsiders, including linguists, easily impute far more explanatory power to physical isolation than is warranted and in so doing reveal as much about themselves as about the mountain folk they study.

Use of the label "Appalachian" for the speech of only one or two mountain communities is also difficult to justify given the size of the region, which has a population of at least twenty million, depending how it is circumscribed. Official demarcations have ranged from 190 counties (in a 1962 survey), to the 397 counties (in thirteen states) according to the Appalachian Regional Commission definition.[18] That such an immense region near major urban areas like Atlanta, Charlotte, Knoxville, Roanoke, and Cincinnati is "isolated" is hardly plausible, but even if Appalachia has been as thoroughly isolated as often asserted, it does not follow that its language or culture would be uniform. Instead, if parts of the region were cut off from one another, we would more likely and reasonably find innumerable local differences. Any linguistic survey of the larger region would almost certainly discover precisely this, especially in vocabulary, even though any diversity within Appalachian English would probably be attributable to local innovations and differential subsequent contact with lowland varieties at least as much as to different degrees of isolation and selective retention of older forms.

In short, the more closely we examine the concept of isolation, the more elusive it becomes. Having identified several problems, should we retain and refashion it in a more usable way, or dispense with it altogether? We are a long way from proposing how to measure or operationalize isolation, and with satellite dishes sprouting in mountain back yards, it may be increasingly irrelevant to do so using factors like physical distance. Because of cable television and the internet, according to Gordon McKinney, "it will now be possible to live in rural Appalachia and be thoroughly integrated into the international communications system."[19] I would argue that, to the extent that mountain life and culture are conservative, as in many ways surely they are, this derives not from the external factor of physical or geographical isolation, but from internal social and psychological factors such as strong cultural identity,

social solidarity, and cohesiveness. This proposal, for which there is not space here to more than begin to sketch, might on reflection come as little surprise, given the many accounts of mountain people having a strongly rooted culture, being intensely loyal to their families and attached to their home places, intent on keeping outsiders at a distance, and so on. Whether these qualities very often have a relation to geographical remoteness is at best debatable.

I doubt neither the realities of the many types of isolation nor the scholarly usefulness of the concept once it is properly defined, but to date linguists have overly employed isolation as a simplistic explanatory device. In the process they have ignored the integrity and the dynamic nature of traditional rural communities like those in the mountains and failed to improve our understanding of their relations to the larger society of which they have always been aware and with whom they have had contact. A broader, more accurate view sees mountain people as choosing the quantity and quality of their cultural and social interaction, rather than as passively receiving whatever external culture and language comes their way, in other words as voluntary agents regulating the contact they have with outsiders (who in mountain idiom are often referred to as "foreigners," to emphasize the psychological distance that natives feel from them). This is true today, and there's no obvious reason why it wouldn't have been true over the past two centuries. Mountain communities have certainly differed from place to place, but many were not isolated so much as detached. What they considered independence and self-reliance was often seen by modern, mainstream culture to be remoteness and backwardness. For a long time in the southern Appalachians, people rarely migrated into the city except under extreme economic duress. Wilhelm says as much: "If [mountain people] were not `of the world' it is not because they were ignorant of the outside ways of life, but because they had seen it, reflected upon it, and almost totally rejected it."[20]

This view argues that internal dynamics of mountain culture provide a much better explanation of its conservativeness than does any type of physical isolation. Since its members are firmly attached to it and have strong local identities, the culture is less open to change, less "permeable," one might say, than elsewhere. The rugged landscape provided them insulation from the larger society. For many things such as language, physical proximity to mainstream culture has been far less crucial than psychological

orientation to change. Many in Appalachia are not only attached to traditional ways, but suspicious of, if not resistant to, change; they want to consider it carefully before adopting it and then may adopt it only on their own terms. There is every reason to expect this orientation to be reflected symbolically in maintenance of speech patterns.

A relative lack of permeability may lead regional and ethnic cultures in close proximity to, or even within, major urban areas in daily contact with the larger culture (e.g. through the media) to maintain and even assert their distinctiveness. A striking instance of this is African-American culture and speech in many large American cities, which appears to be as vigorous and distinct as ever. Thus, it is not necessarily the case that proximity and exposure to other varieties produce linguistic change. To consider isolation to be a cultural determinant is to assume that language would necessarily have changed in its absence and to give no validity to a group's ability to filter out contact with the larger society.

As a linguist, I have attempted in this essay to identify fundamental problems in how my profession uses the construct of isolation more or less uncritically in analyzing Appalachian language. It may not be true for other fields, but in linguistic studies the view that mountain speech is a product of isolation is as dominant as ever, and the concept has yet to receive a critical evaluation. It continues to be used in one way or another to "explain" far too much. Few linguists would claim that mountain culture exists in a vacuum today, but the manner in which they have cited and employed the construct of isolation has had the same practical effect of treating it that way. In this essay I hope to have provided a constructive critique and a modest proposal. Meanwhile, mountain folks, who have always had contact with "foreigners" on a voluntary basis, continue to be just as isolated as they very well want to be.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the 1997 Appalachian Studies Association meeting in Cincinnati. The author is grateful to Philip Obermiller and Anita Puckett for help in formulating ideas and pointing out important references.

2. For further information on Hall's fieldwork, see Joseph S. Hall, "Recording Speech in the Great

Smokies" *Regional Review* 3 (1939), 3-8 (Richmond, Va.: National Park Service, Region One); Joseph S. Hall, *The Phonetics of Great Smoky Mountain Speech*, American Speech Reprints and Monographs no. 4 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942); Michael Montgomery, "The Contributions of Joseph Sargent Hall to Appalachian Studies," *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 6 (1994), 89-98.

3. Horace Kephart, *Our Southern Highlanders* (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

4. Kephart's notebooks are deposited in the Special Collections Department of Hunter Library at Western Carolina University.

5. William Goodell Frost, "An Educational Program for Appalachian America," *Berea Quarterly* 1.4 (1896), 8.

6. Tony Early, "The Quare Gene: What will Happen to the Secret Language of the Appalachians? *New Yorker* (September 21, 1998), 80-82, 84-85.

7. John Fox, Jr., "The Southern Mountaineer," *Scribner's* 29 (1901), 390.

8. Donna Christian, Walt Wolfram, and Nanjo Dube, *Variation and Change in Geographically Isolated Communities: Appalachian English and Ozark English*. Publication of the American Dialect Society 74 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 2.

9. Michael B. Montgomery and Joseph S. Hall, *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004).

10. Durwood Dunn, *Cades Cove: The Life and Death of a Southern Appalachian Community 1818-1937* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

11. Gene Wilhelm, Jr., "Appalachian Isolation: Fact or Fiction?" *An Appalachian Symposium: Essays Written in Honor of Cratis D. Williams*, ed. by J. W. Williamson (Boone, N.C.: Appalachian State University Press, 1977), 78, 77.

12. John Ashworth, "The Virginia Mountaineers," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 12 (1913), 193-211.

13. Ron Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization in the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982).

14. Labov, William, *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

15. Wilhelm, op. cit.; David C. Hsiung, "How Isolated was Appalachia?: Upper East Tennessee 1780-1835," *Appalachian Journal* 6 (1989), 336-49.; David C. Hsiung, *Two Worlds in the Tennessee Mountains: Exploring the Origins of Appalachian Stereotypes* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); Dunn, op. cit.

16. Christian et al. acknowledge this (page 135), but only in their conclusion.

17. Christian et al. state that "in the study that follows, the terms `Appalachian English' (abbreviated AE) and `Ozark English' (OE) will be used in a somewhat loose way. They are not intended as a reference to the speech of all the people who live in Appalachia or in the Ozarks even if these regions are defined quite narrowly" and that "what is being described is, in actuality, the speech only of those residents of the area who became members of the sample, by and large part of the working-class rural population" (pages 6-7). However, the authors' use of the broad designations "Appalachian" and "Ozark" throughout their work (to the exclusion of "West Virginia" and "Arkansas" or narrower terms such as the names of counties or communities) inevitably implies that the speech of those residents is taken to be representative of the two larger mountain regions and found more-or-less throughout to mountains. In this respect it is interesting that Joseph Hall used only "Smoky Mountain English," even though he investigated an area several times as large as the area in West Virginia the authors studied in an earlier book; see Wolfram, Walt and Donna Christian, *Appalachian Speech* (Arlington, Va.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1976).

18. Thomas Ford, *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962). Under the Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1963. Congress defined Appalachia as extending from the Mohawk Valley in New York to the fall-line hills of Mississippi; see Ralph R. Widner, "The Four Appalachias," *Appalachian Review* 2.2 (1967), 13-19.

19. Gordon McKinney, "No Longer the Land Where Time Stands Still," *Berea Alumnus* (Winter 1996), 7.

20. Wilhelm, op. cit., 89.