

247. Recent developments in North American dialectology

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1. Background: The first hundred years, 1889–1989

Since 1889, dialectologists in English-speaking North America have affiliated themselves with the American Dialect Society, an association which in its first constitution defined its object as “the investigation of the spoken English of the United States and Canada, and incidentally of other non-aboriginal dialects spoken in the same countries” (“Constitution”, 1890). Over the years its object has remained essentially the same, only having gradually widened to encompass “the English language in North America, together with other languages or dialects of other languages influencing it or influenced by it” (“Fundamentals”, 1991). Trends and progress in North American dialectology can thus be measured by reference to the meetings and publications of the Society. A persistent underlying trend is that dialectology has never attracted many practitioners in North America. Despite efforts to encourage membership (“The conditions of membership have been made very easy in order to attract many members”, the first secretary wrote [Sheldon 1890: 26]), the Society has never had more than a few hundred active members; the current number is about 500. With so few scholars advancing the enterprise, it is not surprising that developments in the field have come slowly, and projects have taken many years to accomplish. Nor is it surprising that the field has not seen radical change or rapid development. Of the two most substantial projects currently involving members of the Society, one is more than one hundred years old, the other more than seventy. Yet despite the small numbers, much has been accomplished. And in recent years, thanks to the cumulative effect of earlier work, developments in linguistic theory, and the astonishing improvement of computers and electronic communication, rapid progress is coming to the field.

Current advances in North American dialectology can best be appreciated by contrast

with the situation just a few years ago. In December 1989, the American Dialect Society met in Washington, D. C., to celebrate the centennial of its founding and of the scholarly study of dialects in English-speaking North America. It happened to be a retrospective celebration, looking back on projects begun many years ago, not only because the Society was celebrating its history but also because those were the projects still capturing the principal attention of members of the Society. The Society’s oldest and most ambitious project, the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, was celebrated with historical reminiscences and a reception featuring regional foods listed in the dictionary. The other great enterprise in North American dialectology, the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada, was commemorated with a cassette tape sampling aluminum disk recordings made in the 1930s (“Once Upon a Time”, 1990). In addition, Linguistic Atlas materials were the subject of three papers. Other subjects receiving retrospective scholarly attention at the centennial meeting included usage, the social context of dialects, slang, lexicography, Pennsylvania German, the archaicness of Appalachian speech, and inscriptions on tombstones. None of these topics would have surprised the founders of the Society, although some of the methods of studying them would.

1.1. Dictionary of American Regional English

The oldest project of the American Dialect Society, and still its most visible both in 1989 and at the present day, is the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. From the beginning of the Society, in anticipation of this dictionary, regional word-lists were prominent in the Society’s journal, *Dialect Notes*, and one of the Society’s first committees supervised the systematic reading of American books for “American dialect words from the colonial period to the present time” (Emerson 1900: 77). This followed the model of the English Dialect Society, which was industriously publishing its six-volume *English Dialect Dictionary* (Emerson 1902: 276). The intent was to publish an American dialect dictionary of comparable size. But the United States was vast, dialectologists were few, funding was scant, and amateur word-collec-