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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that one important reflection of a culture's status is the existence of general reference books on it. To this end, it discusses the forthcoming "Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English," a book designed to address the lack of a comprehensive reference work on Appalachian speech and language patterns in this region. The paper examines the background, rationale, sources, and main features of the dictionary, along with some of the special considerations that have emerged in the production of the work. The dictionary is largely based on the research of Joseph Sargent Hall, who studied and recorded the speech of the area beginning in the 1930s, along with 20th-century local and historical literature, interviews, glossaries, and local fiction. The dictionary entries contain information on pronunciation and etymology, details of grammatical patterning, cross-references to general works on Appalachia, and calibration of entries to other works, such as the "Oxford English Dictionary" and the "Dictionary of American Regional English." (MDM)

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The Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English as a Resource for Southern Appalachia

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ED 373 565

The Appalachian Studies Association is a mature organization, characterized by much commonness of spirit and purpose. Its meetings offer, as Doyle Bickers pointed out at the banquet for the Georgia meeting in 1990, perhaps the only occasion when people of diverse interests and disciplines across a large region meet and agree that a common sense of being Appalachian overrides anything that might appear to divide us.<sup>1</sup> But beyond the temporary and rather intangible sense of cultural oneness shared at this annual conference, what makes us value our "Appalachianness"? What common possessions give status and prestige to the region's culture for outsiders and provide Appalachian people a source of value and cultural recognition--that exemplify the culture? While musical traditions come immediately to mind, what other sources of positive self-reference exist for what is one of the most widely recognized regional cultures in the country?

This paper argues that one important reflection of a culture's status is the existence of general reference books on it. Unfortunately, by this criterion Appalachia is rather poorly represented. Beyond Charlotte Ross's splendid general bibliography (1976), what else can be cited? Where can one turn when a question arises about an Appalachian tradition, cultural practice, or historical event? Depending on how they are motivated, organized, produced, and marketed, reference works can constitute strong cultural and political statements, and they enable users to appreciate and participate in such statements. At the very least, the lack of general reference works surely denies the people of Appalachia many opportunities to develop respect and understanding for their traditions. In no case are there more misconceptions and a stronger need for education than for the language of the region.

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Appalachian speech is frequently caricatured by the media and disparaged outside the region. Rarely does it open any doors for its users or merit public respect.

At least part of the reason for this is a lack of education about Appalachian speech; although much has been written about it, most publications are romanticized and antiquarian, focusing on the highly unusual or old-fashioned expressions of mountain people, who are often said to speak Elizabethan (if not Chaucerian) English and never to lack an apt and colorful phrase. This characterization assigns a special status to mountain speech and may even give its users a sense of nostalgia, but it hardly helps Appalachian English compete with the prestige of other varieties of American speech in contemporary cultural, political, and economic arenas. Despite the fact that more than 600 items have been published (according to the McMillan and Montgomery 1989 bibliography) there is no volume one can consult for comprehensive view of Southern mountain speech, no scholarly based dictionary of the region's language usable by schoolteachers, the public, or researchers to understand language patterns of the region, much less the dialogue of Appalachian fiction or how language patterns signify regional culture. Perhaps the symbolic value of a reference work on language can be debated, but its practical value to both members and nonmembers of a culture is quite real.

This paper discusses a forthcoming work that aims to fill this gap for Appalachian English, a volume which attempts to bridge scholarly and popular readerships. The *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English* is a comprehensive volume encompassing the typical, traditional, and distinctive speech of a relatively small but perhaps the best-known and most-studied part of the Southern mountain region. Here will be outlined the background, rationale, sources, and main features of the dictionary, and some of the special considerations

that have arisen in producing this work will be examined. It also lays out the types of information to be contained in the dictionary and presents sample entries.

The dictionary is being edited by this writer, who is completing the work of the late scholar Joseph Sargent Hall (1906-1992). Hall's contributions to Appalachian studies are discussed in an essay in last year's issue of the *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* (Montgomery 1994). The Smoky Mountains cover more than seven hundred square miles of remote coves and rugged, often dense forests, a region that was settled in the early nineteenth century primarily by second- and third-generation Americans of Scotch-Irish, English, and German descent (Frome 1966). When the Great Smoky Mountains National Park came in the 1930s, nearly all of the population of thirty to forty thousand was relocated.<sup>2</sup>

Now more than a half-century later, the Smoky Mountains have plenty of permanent residents, but the only humans are park personnel such as rangers on special assignment. Thus, it might seem that a dictionary of this area's English would be a narrow historical record of the language of relatively few people formerly and no one today. This is not strictly true, for several reasons. For one, many of the former residents and their children still live on the edge of the park area. They are either employed by the park service or work in one of the countless local businesses that capitalize on the ten million annual visitors to the park area, and they largely maintain the cultural reference and the language patterns of their parents and grandparents of the first half of the century.

More to the point, this effort in regional lexicography doesn't claim that the Smoky Mountains are necessarily a culturally and linguistically distinct area, but that they constitute a typical and probably the most widely documented part of Southern Appalachia and represent the best basis so far for a dictionary germane to the entire region (pending the

marshalling of funds and the long-term editorial commitment for a work on Appalachian English more broadly). Motivating the decision to fashion a dictionary of Smokies English are two factors: the immense amount of material collected by Joseph Sargent Hall over a course of more than thirty years; and the perception of the Smoky Mountains as a significant cultural and linguistic repository.

Joseph Hall first began studying Smokies speech in 1937 under the auspices of a National Park Service program to record the experiences, music, and language of mountain people whose land was being bought to develop the park (many of the older residents were allowed to stay if they deeded their property to the government upon their death). In years following, Hall finished his Ph.D. at Columbia (in 1942) and moved on to full-time teaching in his native Montana and then in California. But because he had fallen in love with the mountains, befriended many local people, and become increasingly fascinated by all aspects of Smokies language and lore, he returned to the area periodically until the late 1960s to visit friends and to record and observe the local speech. Three collections of his material were published between 1960 and 1978, including *Sayings from Old Smoky* (1972), a precursor to the forthcoming dictionary. After retiring in 1972, he began excerpting his material on note cards; by the time of his death, Hall had compiled a master list of expressions and usages in a typescript of approximately 300 pages, which became the dictionary's first draft. The present co-editor was invited by Hall to collaborate in 1990 and agreed to incorporate other sources into the work and to edit it for publication.

Hall excerpted his material in a straight-forward, informal way, his selection of items guided by a general sense of what would be striking to outsiders (like himself), emblematic of mountain culture, and informative to students of the mountains. He did not formulate more rigorous criteria for selection because he did not contemplate formal publication of his

material, and he gave his working effort a more modest title, *A Glossary of Smokies Speech*. Hall anticipated depositing his typescript, along with his other materials, in the Library of Congress and in an archive in the Southern Appalachian region.

#### Rationale for the Dictionary

Such a work as the *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English* is desirable for a number of reasons, some of which have already been cited.

The Smoky Mountains form neither an area that is completely distinct geographically, comparable to an island (although the present boundary of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park does almost entirely encompass the Smoky Mountains proper), nor a political entity which would offer a convenient line of demarcation in collecting material for a dictionary.<sup>3</sup> But they represent an area of great interest to folklorists, anthropologists, historians, and other specialists as well as to the general public. More books have been written about the people, folkways, topography, and natural history of the Smokies than any other area of Appalachia. Interestingly, many of these are by-products (reminiscences, autobiographies, etc.) of the government's dislocation of mountain residents. The Smokies constitute the part of Appalachia with which more Americans have first-hand contact than any other, because of the large number of visitors drawn to the national park.

Another reason for a dictionary of Smoky Mountain English is that the great number of on-site recordings (Hall's and others) of people born and raised in the mountains, along with the considerable local literature, will enable the work to be based largely on dated, authentic citations from identifiable individuals. This contrasts to previous works on Appalachian English which rely on artificial (or at least unattributed) examples, such as Paul Fink's glossary *Bits of Mountain Speech* (1974) or the word-list compiled by Jim Wayne Miller

and Loyal Jones and appended to *Southern Mountain Speech* (1992, 63-126), their collection of Cratis Williams' papers on the subject. The only exception to this apparently is *Smoky Mountain Voices: A Lexicon of Southern Appalachian Speech* (1993), edited by Harold F. Farwell and J. Karl Nicholas, which draws on quotations of mountain speech collected by Horace Kephart in his many notebooks.

Finally, as already stated, despite the numerous publications on Appalachian English and despite a flourishing tradition of local glossaries, there is no volume one can consult for comprehensive view of Southern mountain speech. No glossary published to date has etymologies or pronunciations, for instance, or several other features of the forthcoming dictionary. In short, the Smoky Mountain material offers the best basis for producing a thorough, although it can never be complete, record of the traditional language of the Southern mountains.

#### Source Material for the Dictionary

A dictionary of Smoky Mountain English is feasible, even though nearly all of the territory is now a national park and depopulated, because of the amount of material on which to base it:

- 1) Hall's own collections, which form the initial and largest source for the dictionary. These include eighteen notebooks of observations, more than fifty hours of recorded interviews, several thousand notecards, and related items, including compilations of terms from folk medicine, logging, and hunting, as well as a comprehensive typescript drawn from this material.

- 2) A wealth of twentieth-century local and historical literature (more than fifty titles, including at least thirty nostalgia items) detailing the daily lives of Smoky Mountain

residents. Hall drew citations from a few of these, especially Horace Kephart's *Our Southern Highlanders* (1913, 1922), but Montgomery is completing an exhaustive reading program on these works, other publications by naturalists and other specialists on the Smokies, and many unpublished documents in the library of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park at the Sugarlands Visitor Center near Gatlinburg, an archive whose assistance on many counts the editors could hardly have done without.<sup>4</sup>

3) More than a hundred hours of interviews conducted from the 1950s through the 1970s national park personnel with former residents of the Smokies, the recordings and transcripts of which are deposited in the library of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

4) Other glossaries, like Fink's *Bits of Mountain Speech* or Vic Weals' *Hillbilly Dictionary* (n.d.), from which will be drawn items not found in our primary material cited above, if such items have either been heard by Montgomery or for which good independent evidence exists.

5) Local fiction, but to a very limited extent, for reasons discussed below. To date, only three works of fiction have been excerpted: Mildred Haun's *The Hawk's Done Gone*, Wilma Dykeman's *The Tall Woman*, and Fred C. Mathes' *Tales from the Smokies*.

6) Local informants born in the mountains, who are being consulted for terms in specific semantic domains (e.g. flora and fauna) and to fill in identifiable gaps in the written record.

### Main Features of the Dictionary

This work on Smoky Mountain English is a dictionary, rather than a glossary or word-list. This means that, beyond the entry term and a gloss or definition, the dictionary will provide the following types of information, wherever possible: part of speech,



pronunciation, etymology, details of grammatical patterning; cross-reference to general works on Appalachia which provide detailed discussion; and calibration of entries to other works, particularly historical dictionaries such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Two sample entries follow:

**hell** n. An impenetrable, and often vast, tangle of rhododendron, mountain laurel, briar, etc., as in Huggins Hell (near Mt. LeConte) and Jeffry's Hell (s w of the park near Hangover Mountain). According to *OED*, from Old English, Middle English *hele* "hiding place, cover." According to *EDD*, "*Obsol.* a dark place in the woods."

1883 Zeigler and Grosscup (quoted in *DA*) In vast tracts impenetrable tangles of the rhododendron and palmia. . . locally called "Hells," with a proper noun possessive in remembrance of poor unfortunates lost in their mazes. Kephart 1922:375  
 A "hell" or "slick" or "woolly-head" or "yaller patch" is a thicket of laurel or rhododendron, impassable save where the bears have bored out trails. Hall 1967  
 Townsend TN I've been at the Hangover at the head of Jeffry's Hell . . . Old Man Jefferson [sic] got lost in there and he come out and they says, "What kind of a place was that?" and he says, "It's a hell of a place." And they named it that on that account.

*holp, holped* (Usually pronounced as [hop, hopt]) v. Variant of *help* in all uses, esp. past tense and past participle. *Hept* is also common.

1) As infinitive. Kephart 1917:413 I axed him to holp me out.

2) As preterite. Hall 1939 Emerts Cove TN I holped a party run his generation back not long ago. [=I helped a man trace his family back etc.] Hall 1939 Wears Cove TN I holped take Mellinger up. . . I he'ped take his bones to Gatlinburg.

3) As past participle. Hall 1937 Big Creek NC I've holped set fire and fight fire too.

### Special Considerations for this Dictionary

In this section are discussed five issues that have arisen in the process of editing the dictionary. These concern how select and treat entries consistently. Collectively, they give insight to the scope of the work and the practical challenges of compiling a comprehensive dictionary on Smokies speech.

1) Criteria for selecting entries. What qualifies as a suitable entry, as the "typical, traditional, and distinctive" language of the Smoky Mountains? First, it must be recognized that any criteria used are quite subjective, if no other reason that only a partial record exists of mountain speech. We may not be able to determine with satisfaction whether a term is typical or common enough in the mountains or whether it is distinctive enough either; whether to include many terms will have to be left to the best judgment of the editors, who early on agreed with lexicographers since the days of Samuel Johnson who realize that dictionary editing is an art, not a science. It is crucial to balance the "typical" and the "distinctive," in order to keep the dictionary from being only a collection of unusual specimens and to ensure that it encompasses the everyday, but in some sense notable, speech of people. The noun *hell* "laurel slick" is a simple matter to include, because all citations for it in the *Dictionary of American Regional English* are from the Southern Appalachians. The prefix *a-* on words like *a-going* and *a-coming* is another matter; the dictionary will include a

detailed entry on this form because it has been typical of speakers in the Smoky Mountains for a long time, although it is well attested in old-fashioned speech in many other parts of the country.

Perhaps the "typical" and "traditional" criteria can best be met by providing citations from at least three sources from different time periods, as the dictionary is endeavoring to do for each entry. The dictionary includes not only many of what may be called traditional terms of folk culture (e.g., *corn pone*, *serenade*) but also common terminology of well-known mountain industries like logging and moonshining and popular terms for mountain flora, hunting, and medicinal treatments. As far as distinctive terms are concerned, the dictionary will not seek to limit entries to items either originating in the Smoky Mountains (which will be few in any case) or used there exclusively (found there but nowhere else, because of their local application, their retention from older varieties of American English, or otherwise; these will also be infrequent).

Instead, by relying on citations from the Smoky Mountains and using other sources, the dictionary enters terms whose meaning, grammar, or in some cases pronunciation are in some way different in form or in frequency of occurrence in Smoky Mountain English from American English in general, or that appear not to occur outside Appalachian English. It is this stipulation that most clearly shows how the dictionary will be a reference work for all of Appalachia. To implement this broader conception of distinctiveness consistently, each potential term is being checked against other regional and historical dictionaries like the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Inevitably, however, this process leaves open questions for further investigation, including a general assessment of the distinctiveness of Appalachian English or the degree to which it represents patterns widely found in American folk speech in early periods. The volume may to a considerable degree turn out to be a

dictionary of older traditional American English. It is still open to question to what extent Appalachian English is distinctive or represents patterns widely found in American folk speech in early periods. The closely related issues of on what basis Appalachian English is defined and indeed whether it is a definable entity can also not be addressed by a dictionary.

2) Currency of items. How can we know if the terms considered for the dictionary were, or still are, common ones and whether they are currently used rather than only remembered? If the dictionary compiles primarily unusual, archaic, or recessive terms, it will be of use to scholars but of value to the public only as a historical record. This highlights the importance of differentiating typical, common terms from distinctive ones. Within mountain speech, there is often variation in vocabulary and grammar that must be sorted out in making this distinction. Mountain speakers use *y'all*, *you all*, and *you'uns*, but which one occurs most often? To pin down the currency of items, two strategies have been adopted. One is the preparation of a computer-readable corpus of interview transcripts, a concordance which provides information on the relative frequency of terms. The other is a program of interviews with present-day speakers of Smoky Mountain English that the present writer has begun to conduct to assess the present currency of terms and to identify inadvertent gaps in coverage. Even so, it will prove very difficult to assign labels like "archaic" and "rare" with certainty, and it is also clear that the distinction for any speaker between the usage and the recognition of a given term is elusive, if not unreal. Although citations in the dictionary will usually be dated, inasmuch as they were recorded or written at certain times and places, the *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English* cannot be a historical dictionary in the sense of indicating whether most items have increased or decreased in currency or even passed out of usage.

3) Treatment of literary dialect. Much local color literature, produced for both local and national readerships, has been set in the mountains of East Tennessee and Western North Carolina, an area much larger than the Smokies, since the 1880s, when Mary Noailles Murfree, alias Charles Egbert Craddock, put the territory on the literary map with novels like *In the Tennessee Mountains* and *The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains*. The attraction of drawing citations from the dialogue of this regional literature is threefold:

a) It offers instances of many items that significantly predate their citations from other sources;

b) It provides citations for some items that are unattested in other written and recorded sources but which the editors know represent bona fide usages from their personal observation of mountain speech.

In both of these ways literary dialect can usefully expand coverage and supplement the documentary record for many items. However, a third matter is more problematical.

c) It offers citations of terms which are completely unattested elsewhere (i.e., not in the numerous word-lists and other studies of Appalachian speech or from personal observation). Three examples illustrate this:

1) *whenst* (= *when*): "*Whenst* I war young, I went down to Sevierville *wunst*." (Mary Noailles Murfree, *Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains*)

2) *you'uns* (used as a singular): "Leastwise, I know ez he sent word arterward ter D'rindy, by his dep'ty, -- ez war a-scoutin' 'roun' hyar, arter *you'uns*, I reckon, Rick," (Mary Noailles Murfree, *Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains*)

3) *be'n't*: "Hit air bespoke fur him, an' ther' *be'n't* no sense in henderin' sech ez be bespoke beforehan'." (Will Allen Dromgoole, "Fiddling His Way to Fame").

Are such usages simply the creations or perhaps the overindulgence of literary imaginations? Or might they be highly recessive usages that have slipped beyond the nets of students of the language who arrived too late to observe them? The primary value of literary citations is to further exemplify terms found in natural speech. The editors believe that items found exclusively in literary dialect, if included at all, must be assigned a special status, given a label or given an asterisk, not just cited according to their source and taken at face value (the usual practice of other dictionaries). This special marking means that the dictionary to a degree addresses the validity of individual items from literary dialect, but it must leave open the question of how well literary portrayals actually represent speech--an issue on which insufficient theoretical work has been done by students of American English.

4) Demarcating the limits of coverage. How does one determine what material to include in compiling the dictionary and what not to? Should citations from speakers born in the mountains but residing some distance away be excluded? If so, how old must they have been when they left the mountains to qualify? These again are judgment calls, largely because Hall in his preliminary work included terms from any native of the mountains, even if that person had resided in another state for twenty years (the present co-editor takes a much narrower view on this). Much literary dialect (Murfree, Dromgoole, etc.) is apparently based on the Cumberland Mountain region more than a hundred miles west of the Smokies (Murfree knew the Cumberlands well, but apparently never visited the Smokies even though she set some fiction there). Perhaps this is one place to draw the line and exclude literary dialect material not clearly localized to the Smokies; this would obviate some of the problems in treating otherwise-unattested items discussed above.

5) Inclusion and handling of pronunciation. This issue concerns whether or not to represent head words in modified orthography and whether to use the International Phonetic

Alphabet for phonetic representation. Because many readers will have expectations, fostered by a tradition of popular glossaries and the semi-phonetic spellings of mountain speech in literature, that modified spelling is permissible for mountain words, should the dictionary do more than provide phonetic transcription for them under the conventional spelling? The editors have chosen to use standard IPA phonetics in general and to present, for the purposes of cross-referencing, a semi-phonetic spelling of selected entries. In other words, an entry such as the following for *sarvis* will lead the reader to a longer treatment of the word under its conventional spelling, *service*. This organization again has been devised in order to serve both specialist and the popular readers:

*sarvis*, see *service(berry) tree*

*service tree, serviceberry tree* (Usually pronounced [sarvis]) n. Shad bush, servicebery.

*Amelanchier laevis* etc.

Hall 1937 Cataloochee NC I went up a sarvis tree to watch him. Hall 1953 Deep Creek NC She [a wounded bear] couldn't never get over a sarvis log. (Fate Wiggins 93). Stupka/Robinson 1965:51 This handsome little tree is one of the earliest to flower. The fruits ripen in summer. They are purplish, juicy, and very sweet. They are much loved by bears.

## Conclusion

As with any other reference work, producing a dictionary is both a scholarly enterprise and a public responsibility. For the Appalachian community, it can hardly be anything less than a political statement as well. The result, the editors hope, will be a

permanent resource for cultural education, a continuing key to understanding the history and dynamics of a culture, a volume always ready to be pulled off the shelf for consultation.

Appalachian speech patterns have a doubtful status both outside the region and within Appalachia, because of their severely limited use on formal occasions and because of the self-consciousness if not schizophrenia of its speakers, who are schooled to view many of their native language habits as "incorrect" but who are strongly attached to them nonetheless. The prevalent, and possibly hardening, ideology in our schools and society at large gives little value to the English language patterns of regionally defined groups. What would most improve the status of Appalachian English and give it some respect is its more frequent use on formal and culturally significant occasions. While this would be of undeniable symbolic value, the first and most signal step to take would be for speakers to begin recognizing the history and regularities of their own native speech habits. To facilitate this education, the *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English* will include three introductory essays on the history, grammar, and pronunciation of Southern Appalachian English.

As this paper stated at the outset, there are almost no reference works on Appalachia. The prospect of a dictionary raises the question of how feasible and desirable others, even an encyclopedia of the region (perhaps modeled on the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*) might be. Any such effort would require a strong institutional base and years of planning and editing and could hardly be initiated without a major commitment from a publisher. But the role of a reference book, as well as the Appalachian Studies Association, in identity formation for the Appalachian region can hardly be underestimated.



## Notes

1. Bickers also puckishly remarked that it also provided the only gathering of people who knew how to pronounce the word *Appalachia* correctly.
  
2. Population estimated by Glenn Cardwell, Park Ranger for Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 1991.
  
3. There is, in fact, no regional dictionary of North American English which is not based on a geographical or political boundary; cf. *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Story, Kirwin, and Widdowson 1990) and *Dictionary of Alaskan English* xxx
  
4. We are most grateful to Annette Evans, librarian, and Kitty Manscill, archivist, for their help.

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