

# THE ENGLISH OF THE NEGRO

BY GEORGE PHILIP KRAPP

THE FIRST Negroes were brought to Virginia twelve years after the settlement at Jamestown and one year before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. The three hundredth anniversary of their arrival is therefore but recently past. The occasion was not celebrated with pageant and rejoicing, but it was nevertheless an anniversary of no little significance. For the twenty black souls that became the chattels of Virginia planters in 1619 are now represented by ten millions of their kin—nearly a tenth of the total inhabitants of the country. Yet they are still outsiders, and time has done little to make them less alien than they were in the beginning. Great numbers of Frenchmen, Germans, Irishmen, and Dutchmen, and not a few Indians have been absorbed by the original stock so completely that only an expert genealogist can discover the fact of their foreign origin. But once a Negro, always a Negro. He is officially an American citizen; in many places he can even vote; but beyond that, let him insist never so violently, he can claim nothing.

In one very important respect, however, the Negro is not a foreigner and an outcast: his language is finally and completely English. Unlike the Indian, who has never been at home in our speech, he has for generations had but one language, and that one the English. Into this, the most intimate social possession of the American people, he has been taken without reservation or qualification. The physical, political and social differences between black and white have not closed the gate. The Negro speaks English of the same kind and, class for class, of the same degree as the English

of the most authentic descendants of the first settlers at Jamestown and Plymouth.

The Negroes, indeed, in acquiring English have done their work so thoroughly that they have retained not a trace of any native African speech. Neither have they transferred anything of importance from their native tongues to the general language. A few words, such as *voodoo*, *hoodoo*, and *buckra*, may have come into English from some original African dialect, but most of the words commonly supposed to be of Negro origin, e.g., *tote*, *jazz*, and *mosey*, are really derived from ancient English or other European sources. The native African dialects have been completely lost. That this should have happened is not surprising, for it is a linguistic axiom that when two groups of people with different languages come into contact, the one on a relatively high, the other on a relatively low cultural level, the latter adapts itself freely to the speech of the former, whereas the group on the higher cultural plane borrows little or nothing from that on the lower.

## II

Many of the characteristics of Negro English which are assumed to be the peculiar property of the Negroes are merely archaic survivals of good old English. Such survivals might reasonably be expected, for a people more or less isolated from the central developments in the life of a race always retain cultural characteristics that the main body loses. This isolation may be geographical, like that of the Tennessee mountaineers, or it may be social, as with the Negroes. The traditional Negro pro-

nunciations are all of good English origin. The Negro's *watermillion* for *watermelon* was common English usage everywhere in America as late as the first quarter of the Nineteenth Century. When the Negro says *drap* for *drop*—which he now does only in dialect literature or on the vaudeville stage—he says what many a Yankee always said a hundred years ago. Even the Negro's *guine* for *going* is good archaic American English. This pronunciation was current in New England in the Eighteenth Century, and it has lingered in the Negro speech simply because the Negro, being socially backward, has held on to many habits which the white world has left behind. As a phenomenon in language the pronunciation has an honored place in the history of English. The pronunciation of the word *choir* as though it were written *quire* is of the same category, and so is that old pronunciation of the family name *Burgoyne* which made it *Burwayne*.

The construction *I is* and the use of the third singular present for all three persons and both numbers of the present tense of *to be* seems as characteristically Negro as anything in the language. But it is not abnormal or unparalleled English. From the Thirteenth Century, forms like *I is, you is, we, you, they is* are on record in the northern dialect of English, and Wright's Dialect Dictionary contains numerous examples from remote localities in modern England. This usage seems practically to have disappeared in American English, except in Negro speech. But it is a common observation that even illiterate speech in America is less rustically dialectal than similar speech in England. The construction *I is* has been levelled out of American white speech, but it still lingers on the tongues of illiterate Negro speakers. So with all similar or apparently similar forms. Generalizations are always dangerous, but it is reasonably safe to say that not a single detail of Negro pronunciation or of Negro syntax can be proved to have any other than an English origin.

The statement is often made that some-

thing in the physical structure of the Negro's organs of speech gives to his English an unmistakable and distinctive quality. People say they can always tell a Negro by his voice, even on the telephone, or through ten feet of concrete. By the evidence of experiment, however, this is found to be simply not true. When the voices only are heard and the speakers are not seen, Negro speakers cannot be distinguished from white speakers merely by the quality of their voices. Of course they may be distinguished by other things, by vocabulary, by subject matter, or even by cadence and lilt, just as a Scotsman, an Irishman, a Londoner may be distinguished by his speech tunes. Every social group is likely to have more or less characteristic speech rhythms. But these are not strictly matters of tone quality in the voice. They are melodic variations of pitch and they must be abstracted before one may profitably compare the voices of Negroes and of white speakers. Obviously another condition necessary to make this a fair experiment is that the speakers, black and white, must be on approximately the same cultural level. To compare the speech of an extravagantly illiterate Negro with that of a conventionally educated white person means nothing at all.

Negroes are supposed to have rich, melodious, easy voices, but this supposition is nothing more than a convention, and has no necessary connection with reality. By a similar convention the New Englander is supposed to have a drawling, whining and nasal pronunciation, and the Westerner to have a hard, flat pronunciation, whatever that may be. But all New Englanders do not drawl and dribble their words through the nose, all Westerners do not talk like a cart going over a cobble pavement, nor do all Negroes have soft and mellifluous voices. Joel Chandler Harris was remarkably painstaking in his use of dialect, both that of the Southern whites and that of the Negroes; nevertheless, the speech of Uncle Remus and the speech of rustic whites as Harris records them are so much alike that

if one did not know what character was speaking, one would often be unable to tell from the record whether the words were those of a white man or of a Negro. Similar evidence from direct observation has been given by another competent Southern observer. "If one happened to be talking to a native with one's eyes shut," says Professor Harrison, "it would be impossible to tell whether a Negro or a white person were responding."

An exaggerated impression of the special character of Negro English is often produced by the methods employed in attempts at its literary transcription. After commenting on the impossibility of an exact reproduction, in a prefatory note to "In Ole Virginia," Thomas Nelson Page gives certain rules as aids in representing the Negro speech of Eastern Virginia. "The final consonant," he says, "is rarely sounded. Adverbs, prepositions and short words are frequently slighted, as is the possessive. The letter *r* is not usually rolled except when used as a substitute for *th*, but is pronounced *ab*. For instance, the following is a fair representation of the peculiarities cited: The sentence, 'It was curious, he said, he wanted to go into the other army,' would sound: 'Twuz cu-yus, he say, he wan(t) (to) go in (to) 'turr ah-my.'"

English thus transcribed undoubtedly looks very different from the kind of English that ordinarily meets the eye. But it is a legitimate inquiry how far this difference is due merely to a completer carrying out of a phonetic method than is customary in transcriptions of the speech of cultivated or uncultivated whites. Thus 'twuz for *it was* might be heard in any rapid colloquial speech, white or black, cultivated or uncultivated, and *ah-my* for *army* would not seem strange anywhere in the South or in New England. Even *cu-yus* for *curious* looks stranger than it sounds. The loss of the *r* in this word is a very natural development in the speech of all those persons who omit their *r*'s finally and before other consonants. As for the pronunciation

*wan(t) (to) go* for *want to go*, the record is certainly not quite adequate. For the Negro pronunciation *he wan go* is not merely equivalent rhythmically to *a man go*. After *wan* a pause occurs, the position for *t* being formed and held momentarily, though no explosion is made. This pause therefore separates the word *want* from *go*, and in the Negro *wan* the final *n* may be said to be long. But under no circumstances in colloquial English would the phrase *want to go* be pronounced by anybody with more than one *t*. The natural pronunciation would be something like *wan t go*, and the difference between this and the Negro *wan go* is much less than the apparent difference between *want to go*, the Negro's simplified grammar for *wanted to go*, and *wan go*.

In other words, literary transcriptions of Negro speech are likely to approach more nearly to scientific exactness in the recording of the shadings of pronunciation than literary transcriptions of other forms of English ordinarily do. The Uncle Remus stories, for example, are burdened with a mass of phonetic detail which is quite commonplace from the point of view of the scientific transcription of English speech, but which serves nevertheless to make the language of Uncle Remus seem very markedly different from other forms of familiar English speech. The phonetic spellings merely emphasize what ordinarily would pass unnoticed. One's ears are tuned differently for the hearing of Negro speech from the way they are tuned for the hearing of white speech. If one started without any anticipatory expectation, Negro English would seem like any other English. It would have its variations, but practically all of them would have their correspondences in white speech. For Negro English is not a peculiar species of English; it is only English spoken by Negroes.

### III

The assimilation of the language of the Negroes to the language of the whites did not take place all at once. Though the his-

torical evidence is not as full as might be wished, the stages can be followed with some certainty. When the Negroes were first brought to America they could have known no English. Their usefulness as servants, however, required that some means of communication between master and slave should be developed. There is little likelihood that any masters exerted themselves to understand or to acquire the native language of the Negroes in order to communicate with them. On the contrary, from the very beginning the white overlords addressed themselves in English to their black vassals. It is not difficult to imagine the kind of English this would be. It would be a very much simplified English—the kind of English some people employ when they talk to babies. It would probably have no tenses of the verb, no distinctions of case in nouns or pronouns, no marks of singular or plural. Difficult sounds would be eliminated, as they are in baby talk. Its vocabulary would be reduced to the lowest elements. In short, it would be a language of very much the same kind as those which have developed elsewhere under similar circumstances. It would have resemblances to the Beach-la-Mar of the Western Pacific, the Pidgin English of China, and the Chinook jargon of Western America. As the Negroes imported into America came from many unrelated tribes, speaking languages so different that one tribe could not understand the language of another, they themselves were driven to the use of this infantile English in speaking to one another.

We are not left entirely to inference in this matter. In one group of Negroes, probably the most primitive alive today in their cultural development, clear traces of it still survive. These are the dwellers along the South Carolina coast known as Gullahs. The Gullah dialect is a very much simplified form of English, with cases, numbers, genders, tenses reduced almost to the vanishing point. Many of the grammatical and phonetic characteristics that appear in other jargons, Beach-la-Mar,

Pidgin English and Chinook, are found also in Gullah. Very little of the dialect, however, perhaps none of it, is derived from sources other than English. In vocabulary, in syntax and in pronunciation, practically all of the forms of Gullah can be explained on the basis of English, and probably only a little deeper delving would be necessary to account for those characteristics that still seem strange and mysterious.

Two hundred years ago all the Negroes in America must have spoken a language very similar to Gullah. All the forms recorded, indeed, for the earlier periods bear its mark unmistakably. The written records do not begin, however, until the latter part of the Eighteenth Century, at which time Negroes speaking in character first appeared in American literature. As a literary achievement the Negro is exclusively an American invention. British literature possesses no successful Negro characters and very few unsuccessful ones. The Elizabethan drama has no Negroes speaking in character. Defoe has some passages of Negro speech in his "Family Instructor," and in "Robinson Crusoe" Friday speaks the same kind of language as Defoe's Negro, though Friday must have been an Indian. But in Defoe's mind the proper speech for all savages, Negro or Indian, seems to have been merely an infantile English. One characteristic both of Defoe's Indian and his Negro speech is the adding of a vowel at the ends of words, particularly verbs, for example, *teachee* and *talkee* for *teach* and *talk*. Robinson Crusoe is made to comment on the difficulty he experienced in assisting Friday to get rid of this habit, and Defoe seems to have been of the opinion that this adding of a vowel at the ends of words was an inherent weakness of the savage nature. The custom is still markedly present in Gullah dialect, and all early records of Negro English make a great deal of it. Perhaps it is older than its specifically Negro uses, and perhaps the whole or the greater part of the Negro jargon is older than the slave trade. It may

have been in existence as the commercial language of English traders in their intercourse with Italians, Portuguese and other Continental peoples from very early times and thus have been ready at hand for use in the slave trade.

The earliest records of Negro speech appear in American plays of the period of the Revolution. The completeness and the success with which Negro English is employed in these plays naturally varies with the inclination and the ability of the authors of them. But there can be no doubt that the Negro characters of these early dramas are drawn from life. They share with the rustic Yankee the distinction of being the chief contributions of early American literature to the gallery of English literary characters. One of the earliest of these plays is John Leacock's "Fall of British Tyranny," published at Philadelphia in 1776; it contains a passage of Negro dialogue that may serve for purposes of illustration. The action takes place on a British man-of-war near Norfolk, Virginia, and Lord Kidnapper, who is enlisting Negroes in the British service, converses with Cudjo as follows:

*Kidnapper*—Well, my brave blacks, are you come to list?

*Cudjo*—Eas, massa Lord, you preazee (please).

*Kidnapper*—How many are there of you?

*Cudjo*—Twenty-two, massa.

*Kidnapper*—Very well, did you all run away from your masters?

*Cudjo*—Eas, massa Lord, eb'ry one, me too.

*Kidnapper*—That's clever; they have no right to make you slaves, I wish all the Negroes would do the same, I'll make 'em free—what part did you come from?

*Cudjo*—Disse brack man, disse one, disse one, disse one, come from Hamton, disse one, disse one, come from Nawfok, me come from Nawfok too.

*Kidnapper*—Very well, what was your master's name?

*Cudjo*—Me massa name Cunney Tomsee.

*Kidnapper*—Colonel Thompson—eigh?

*Cudjo*—Eas, massa, Cunney Tomsee.

*Kidnapper*—Well, then, I'll make you a major—and what's your name?

*Cudjo*—Me massa cawra me Cudjo.

*Kidnapper*—Cudjo?—very good—was you ever christened, Cudjo?

*Cudjo*—No, massa, me no crissen.

*Kidnapper*—Well, then, I'll christen you—you shall be called Major Cudjo Thompson. . . .

*Cudjo*—Tankee, massa, gaw bresse, massa Kidnap.

Cudjo's English seems very different both from the actual speech of Negroes to-day, and from Negro speech as it would be used for literary characterization. The stages by which it was outgrown are clearly traceable. To the middle of the Nineteenth Century, the only kind of Negro English that was used in literature was English of the type of Cudjo's. But Irving, Cooper and other writers possessed of literary skill and discrimination used it very sparingly. Cooper's "Pioneers," published in 1823, might be described as an experiment in dialect, with its German English, French English, Irish English, British English, homespun American English—to say nothing of the impossible English of the genteel characters and of the Indian characters. But there is also Negro English in the speech of Agamemnon. Cooper speaks of Agamemnon's Guinea blood, therefore he was supposedly a Guinea Negro, though by the first quarter of the Nineteenth Century the local origins of a particular Negro must have been a matter of very uncertain inference. But whatever his origins, Agamemnon speaks a language akin to the Negro English jargon of the Eighteenth Century. His dialect is less elaborated, however, than the speech of Cooper's other dialect characters, a little of his outlandish English in Cooper's opinion apparently going a long way to supply all this kind of color that was needed.

It is interesting to note that Irving in the "Tales of a Traveler," published in 1824, avoided an obvious opportunity to employ Negro dialect. In "The Adventure of the Black Fisherman," the principal character is Black Sam, but he speaks no dialect, only conventional English. If one may hazard a guess to explain this fact, it would be that the only Negro speech that had any literary tradition in Irving's day was the barbarous dialect that survives now in Gullah, and that this speech was so unlike the speech of Negroes as Irving knew them that he preferred avoiding dialect altogether to using an English so untrue and



so outlandish. Jupiter in Poe's "Gold Bug," published in 1839, speaks a language which belongs to the older tradition, so far as it has any distinctive dialectal characteristics at all, but here again it is significant that Poe elaborated the speech of Jupiter but slightly.

In the decade before the Civil War a considerable body of slavery and anti-slavery imaginative literature was published, but very little of it has any realistic value, the world of nature having been lost for the time in the world of controversy. The most famous Negro character in fiction was presented to the public when Mrs. Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" appeared in 1852. But Uncle Tom expresses himself with very little dialectal color, hardly more than enough to enable the reader to place his speech on the level of colloquial English. Other Negro characters upon whom the weight of doctrine rests less heavily are allowed to speak more dialectally. Aunt Chloe makes use of as complete a Negro speech as Mrs. Stowe had at her command. But the illusion even of Aunt Chloe's speech is very imperfect. Assisted by a bandana turban and charcoal it might pass, but as literary workmanship it is crude. The significant thing about it, however, is that it is no longer the primitive jargon of Eighteenth Century Negro English. By the

middle of the Nineteenth Century this older Negro English had ceased to be possible as a generic representation of Negro speech. The newer tradition had not yet established itself, but when literary artists like Page and Harris put on record the contemporary Negro speaking, everyone recognized that Negro English was no longer a grotesque mutilation of the English language, but merely one of the colloquial forms of our many visaged mother tongue.

For this progress up from the barbarous and infantile English dialect first presented to them by their masters to fellowship in the genuine English language, the Negroes deserve much credit. They might very well have remained content to speak a special tongue; their acquisition of mature English proves that they have been eager to assimilate a higher culture when the way has been open. The white man likewise deserves credit for the black man's progress. In the three hundred years since the first Negroes reached America, the white man also has grown. One cannot quite say that the relations between the two races have become genial, but at least they have become more kindly and humane. Progress has been slow and the barriers to overcome have been great, but the Negro's achievement of the English language encourages hope for the future.

## THIS CITY WIND

BY LEONORA SPEYER

*THIS city wind with puny strength to crawl  
The town's wet streets, with furtive touch to tease  
Loose doors and windows, making sport with these,  
Comes bruised from battered jetty and sea-wall;  
Comes as one limping from far sailors' brawl,  
Skulking along the houses' iron lees,  
With tale of dark disaster on loud seas:  
This city wind that is not wind at all!*

*Because of door uncertainly ajar,  
Clapping its fretful word of Autumn storm,  
I sense these distant tumults half-asleep,  
I know ships founder where black waters are.  
What of land-lubbers, lying safe and warm,  
Drowning in dreams as bitter and as deep?*

## PASSING

BY DAVID MORTON

*HIS life has wandered out in desolate lands,  
On wastes of twilight . . . and the dark comes down;  
Behind him, now, the lighted tower stands,  
And thinning noises follow from the town;  
The far-off musics that the living make,  
With feasting and the sound of song and strings,  
Fainter and fainter falling in his wake,  
Are as a tale of half-remembered things.*

*He is as one who shuts the city gate,  
And takes the way that claims him for its own,  
Seeing how time has left him desolate,  
He walks into the coming dark alone. . . .  
The night will close behind him like a door,  
And at his feast his name be heard no more.*