

Some Words Stop at

What language do you speak? Surprisingly often, it depends on where you live. Many

WHAT language do you speak? Would you call it "plain American"? If so, you may be surprised to learn that despite the vast influence of radio, TV, the movies, magazines, books and national advertising, many of the words and expressions you use every day might not even be understood by people elsewhere in the United States—who also speak "plain American."

If you're a housewife, do you make bacon and eggs in a frying pan—or, as many other American women do, in a *spider*, *creeper*, or *drip-drop*? When you clean house, do you *straighten up* or *tidy up*; *rid up* or *redd up* (as women do in some parts of New England, Ohio and Indiana); *make ménage* (as in New Orleans), or *muck out* (as in some Colorado mining communities)?

If Junior sneaks away from school, do your neighbors say he *skips*, *bags* or *lays out of school*, or that he *plays hooky* or *hooks Jack*? When he reports on how he spent his time, does he tell you he climbed trees, or that he *clim*, *clum*, *clome*, *cloom*, *clam* or *clammed* them? If he ate too many green apples, does he get sick *to*, *at*, *in*, *with* or *about* his stomach?

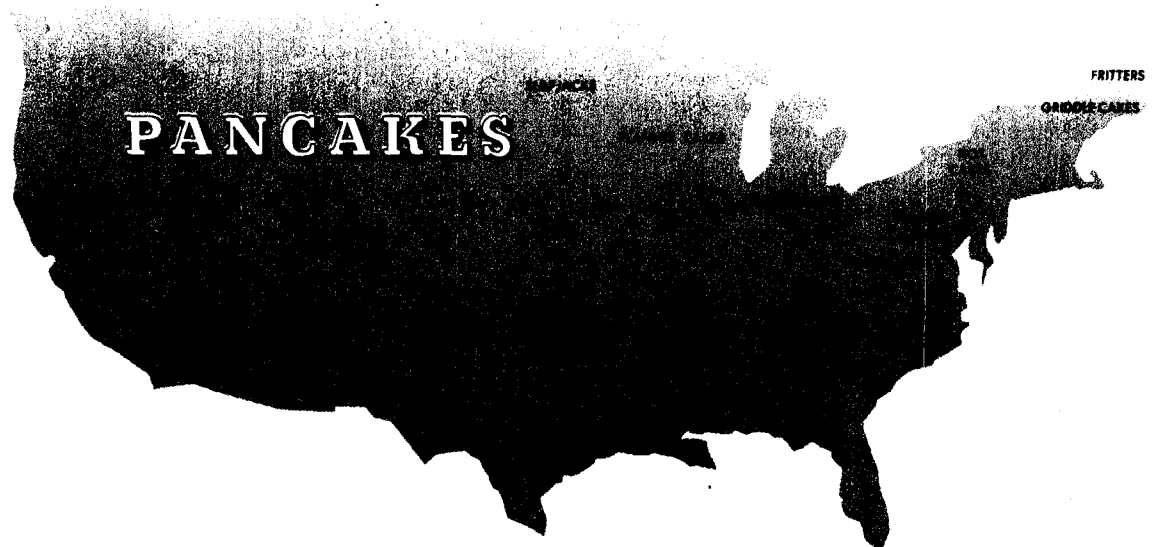
To chart the differences in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation from one American community to another, a small band of language experts—professors and graduate students representing a number of universities—has been traveling around the country for the last 20 years, asking people what words they use for all sorts of simple, everyday objects and actions. They have compiled long lists of variants for everything from the words for the clavicles of a chicken (*wishbone*, *witch bone*, *pull bone*, *pully bone*, *lucky bone*, *merrythought*) to our expressions for the woman who's going to have a baby (she might be *in health*, *in the family way*, *in pregnancy*, *on the road to Boston*, *fragrant* or *footbroke*—the last a local Southern expression derived from an African word).

Sometimes the linguistic geographers use tape or disc recordings, but most of their minutely detailed data are collected in thousands of bulky notebooks, in a special phonetic script which can reproduce about 400 differences in vowel sounds alone. Using this script, the interviewers write down the casual conversations of men and women all over America exactly as they talk on their own front porches (*stoops*, *piazas*, *galleries*).

The linguistic fieldworker must be part historian and part sociologist; he must also have in him the spirit of the bloodhound and more than a trace of the gossip. He will go wherever he can find an informant willing to give the six to 20 hours it takes to answer his questions, which cover from 500 to 800 items of everyday speech. The language experts have carried their notebooks into saloons, cotton fields, race tracks, mines, hospitals, schools, courthouses, shops and factories. One linguist obtained a fruitful interview while riding around in a patrol car with the chief of police of a small Southern town, then got another by sitting for hours on a sidewalk curb, chatting with his subject.

A second researcher spent one whole day quiz-

Maps—based on samplings made by linguists—show how words vary from one part of country to another. Title words (in large type) are those generally understood throughout United States; expressions in small print comprise partial lists of expressions used regionally



SEESAW

TILTING BOARD

TEETER BOARD

TINTER BOARD

TEETER TOTTER

SEE HOSS UP'N DOWN

TEETER
TEETER HORSE

COCK HORSE

COCKY HORSE

RIDY-HORSE
HICKY HORSE

DANDLE

TIPPITY BOUNCE

TEETER

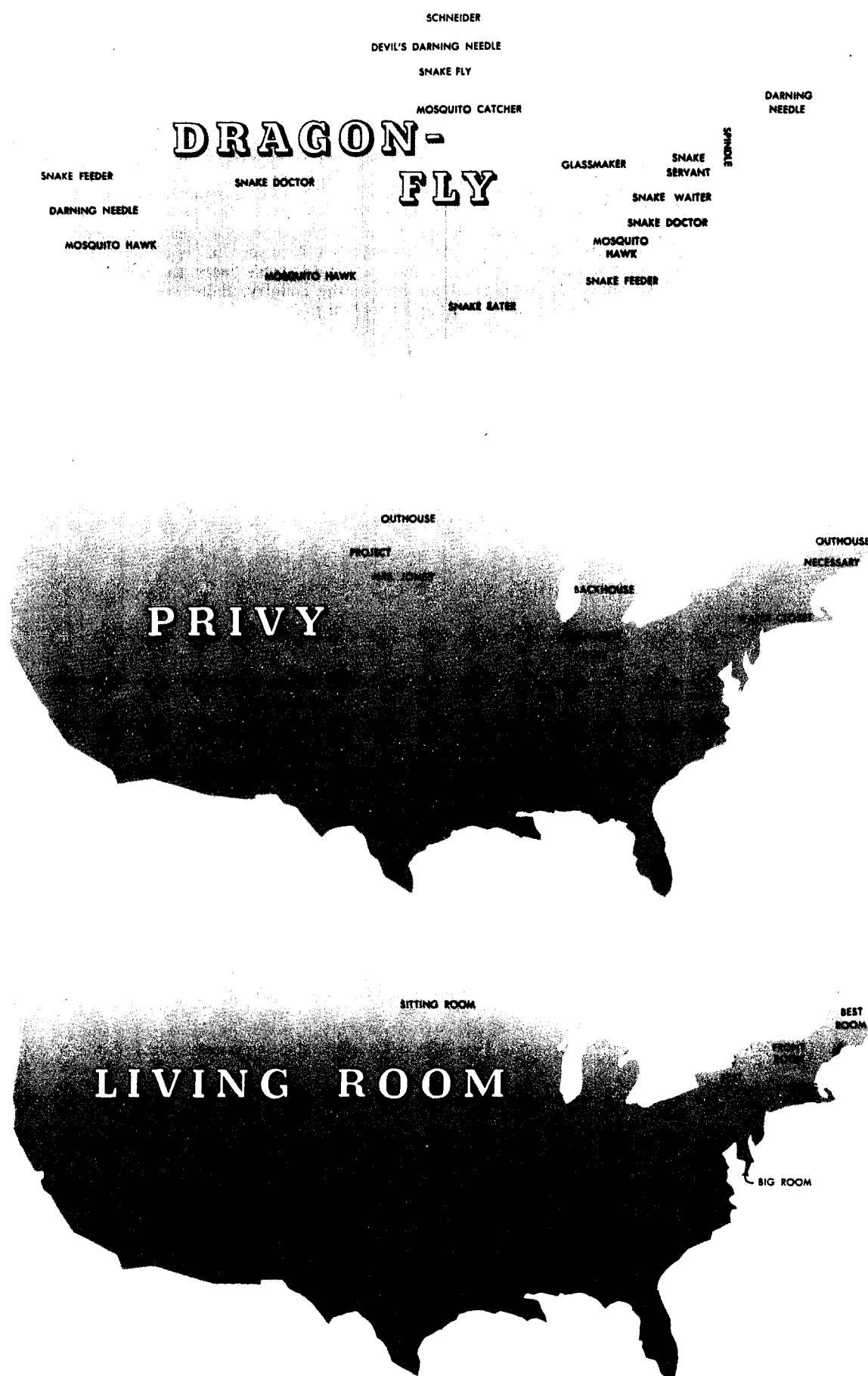
TILT



Marietta, Ohio

By GLEDHILL CAMERON

Maine expressions might make no sense at all in Utah—but plenty in Ohio



AL TARTER

zing a hard-working barber, another day talking to a railroad-crossing watchman who kept a nervous lookout for the road detective (visitors, inquiring professors included, were contrary to regulations); another day perched on a tractor interviewing a farmer; and another in a hospital, where the subject was recovering from an unexpected operation which had interrupted their first interview.

The information so exhaustively collected is going into a colossal work titled Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada (Canada is included to cover colloquial expressions which ignore the international boundary). When the atlas is finished, an estimated 10 years from now, it will contain thousands of maps showing local and regional speech differences and the geographical boundaries, called isoglosses, that limit the areas in which the words and expressions are used. The work is being done under the direction of the University of Michigan's Dr. Hans Kurath—an internationally known linguist who has been a leader of the atlas project since its origin in 1929.

At Work on Many Linguistic Atlases

The atlas actually will consist of a series of regional sets, the first of which, Linguistic Atlas of New England, already has been published. Its six volumes (price for the set: \$185) were brought out by Brown University and the American Council of Learned Societies from 1939 to 1943, at a cost of about \$250,000. Additional atlases are in various stages of completion, two at the University of Michigan, and others at the Universities of Minnesota, Colorado, New Mexico and California, the University of Washington at Seattle and Louisiana State University. Preliminary studies have been made for still another at the University of Texas.

Three kinds of map are used by the researchers to plot variations. First there's the lexical map, which shows the different words Americans use to indicate the same object or action. For example, "something extra" is *lagniappe* in New Orleans, something *to boot* in Kentucky, a *brawtus* in Charleston, South Carolina, a *pillon* in New Mexico—all good American words.

The linguists use a second, phonetic map to show differences in the pronunciation of the same words. The classic example is provided by the old lady in North Carolina who said about her crop of tomatoes, "Oh, we'll eat what we *kin*, and what we *cain't* we'll *can*."

The morphological map, the third type, indicates differences in grammar. Widespread education is rapidly wiping out grammatical variations, the linguists have found. One Georgia man summed up the changes that are occurring: "I used to say, 'I drink water' and 'I have drank,' " he proudly told an atlas fieldworker. "Now I say, 'I drink,' 'I drank' and 'I have drank.' "

Most of the regional departures from the common language of Americans (technically, we all speak what linguists call American English) involve the homey aspects of life: family relationships, kitchens and cookery, farm work, daily chores, children's play and other activities which are relatively immune from outside influences. Some of these localisms are confined to very small geographic areas, says Dr. Kurath. If you say *hook Jack*, meaning to be absent from school without leave, you are most probably from Cape Cod. If you call cows by hollering *chay!*, you're from Williamsburg County, South Carolina. If you're an

Only a drozzel tail would make fossnocks in a drip-drop

old-timer from eastern Long Island, you might call a barnyard or cowpen a *pighitle* (it rhymes with "title").

New England, which had many isolated settlements in colonial times, still carries the traces of that isolation in its current colloquialisms. A deep-dish apple pie is *apple Jonathan* in Rhode Island, *apple grunt* around Plymouth and on Cape Cod, in Massachusetts, and *apple slump* in the Narragansett-Bay region. A garbage pail is an *orts pail* in Essex County, Massachusetts, and (as far as the researchers can tell) nowhere else. A spring onion is a *rareripe* only in certain sections of eastern New England.

According to some people in the great valley of Pennsylvania, a horse doesn't whinny, it *laughs*, and a setting hen may be known in the same region as a *clock*.

Judging from research to date, it's only in Indiana that a child coasting down a hill on a sled or wagon goes *bellity-bump*; and only around New London that he goes *belly-kuhchunk*! In the upper Midwest he may go downhill *boy fashion* and in Louisiana he'll go *scooting* or *head fo'most*. In other parts of the country he may go *belly flop*, *gut*, *bunt*, *bump*, *bumpus*, *button*, *bust*, *booster*, *wop*, *whack*, *womp*, *slide*, *slam*, *kuhchug* or *grinder*.

A Quaint Tale of Courtship

The rural areas retain some of the most colorful speech localisms. In some sparsely settled parts of Maine, for example, you might still hear of a *gorming* (stupid) man who gets all of a *biver* (excited) about a *ding-clicker* (a pretty young woman) and invites her to a *hog-wrestle* (a dance). But he wouldn't propose until he was sure she wasn't *pizen neat* (too neat) or a *drozzel tail* (slovenly person).

It's also in the more remote sections that linguistic geographers report the greatest resistance to interviews. One of the most successful of the atlas fieldworkers is Dr. Raven Ioor McDavid, Jr., of Western Reserve University, Cleveland, a South Carolinian who has conducted chatty sessions with 470 housewives, farmers, lumbermen, miners, businessmen, politicians, Civil War veterans, literary ladies and stenographers all over the country. Dr. McDavid recalls an occasion in Georgia where he couldn't get *anyone* to talk to him. He finally discovered that the small town he was visiting had recently been described by a metropolitan newspaper as a "typical hick town." The citizens were now so sensitive that almost no one was willing to talk to any stranger, whatever his apparent purpose. (The local grocer eventually consented to see McDavid—after insisting that the interview be conducted in the back of his store, at night.)

In his home state of South Carolina, McDavid—who customarily carries 15 or 16 colored pencils, mechanical pencils and fountain pens in his pocket for marking symbols—was accused of being an FBI agent by a man who shut the door on him.

Dr. Harold B. Allen of the University of Minnesota, who has conducted almost 200 interviews for the Atlas of the Upper Midwest, says he was accused of being a Communist spy once, by a hardware merchant in Bemidji, Minnesota. ("Who else," said the hard-

wareman reasonably, "would ask all those questions?")

The late Dr. Guy S. Lowman, Jr., who did most of the field interviews for the New England, Middle and South Atlantic regions, once came out of a house in West Virginia to find the air let out of his automobile tires. (He had been mistaken for a revenue.) Another time he was chased out of a house by the irate son of a genteel Southern lady, who felt that the linguist had put an indelicate question to his mother: "Madam, what do you call the male kind of cow?" (Cityfolk may not realize it, but the word "bull" is never used in mixed company in some parts of the country. Among the more polite substitutes linguistic geographers have recorded are the *masculine*, rhyming with "vine" and heard only on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts, and in West Virginia, the *surley*, in eastern New Mexico and some parts of Texas, and, more generally, the *old man*, the *roarer*, the *mister*, the *master*, *male critter*, *toro*, *gentleman cow*, *preacher cow*, *beast*, *brute*, *jock*, *major*, *top cow*, *tuppin' ox*, *ranger* and the *he*.)

But fieldworkers get only too hospitable a welcome in most places. That is one of the joys, as well as one of the burdens, of a linguistic geographer's life. In the good cause of recording our American speech, they have eaten veritable mountains of home-made cakes, pies, cookies, breads and biscuits of varying degrees of specific gravity, as well as countless doughnuts (*crullers*, *olicooks*, *fat-cakes*, *fried cakes*, *riz doughnuts*, *fossnocks*).

McDavid recalls with satisfaction the day he shared a lunch of mule ears or meat pastys (it rhymes with "nasty") with miners in northern Michigan, and heard a classic argument as to whether the pastys, which provide the miners with a substantial midday meal, keep better carried in the shirt or in the boot.

But a home-cooked meal in Georgia in "lay-by time," when the cotton is opening up and before it's ready to pick, is best remembered as the occasion for what McDavid, who prides himself on "blending in with the foliage," describes as his greatest tribute.

"The lunch was a mess of something pretty greasy and full of red pepper," he says, "but I fell to. I noticed my informant's elderly sister, who had cooked the meal, watching me with great satisfaction. Then she said: 'I could have gone and kilt a chicken, Mr. McDavid. But I figured you didn't want to be treated like no preacher.'"

The fieldworkers admit that it is surprising that people are willing to be interviewed and to talk long, readily and freely. Except in the most general way, they aren't told exactly what the interview is about; if they knew, they might become self-conscious—and it's the unguarded response of natural, everyday conversation that the linguist hopes to capture.

Armed with lists of the kinds of words he wants the subject to use, the researcher conducts the interview in as close an approximation to casual conversation as he can. He must also be keenly alert to pronunciation and grammar. McDavid usually starts out with what he calls shotgun questions: "What

do you call this room that we're in?" "What are those utensils on the stove?" "What do you call other rooms in the house?" The fieldworker never asks a subject to repeat, and answers are never directly suggested.

"For example," explains Dr. Allen, "I'll say to the person, 'I suppose you fry your eggs in a . . . ' then he'll take it from there and fill in 'skillet' or 'frying pan' or whichever word comes most naturally. Often he'll look surprised that I don't know. Each person requires a different approach. We ask about familiar things—expressions of time, weather, farm crops and utensils, vehicles, animals, food, the family and its relations, the human body, social life and institutions, religion and so on.

"I usually start out by explaining we're making a study of the changing names for things. That pleases the old folks, who have thought all along that kids nowadays are pretty dumb not to know the difference between a 'hame' and a 'chokestrap' (parts of a harness)."

A community is selected for interviews only after a careful study of its

"cultured." An interesting discovery: one town's speech vulgarity may be a perfectly acceptable regionalism in another community, even among the "cultivated" inhabitants.

Linguists believe that recording the living language of America for the first time should lead to a more realistic approach to the teaching of English in schools and colleges. For, they ask, isn't it a waste of time for English teachers to try to stop New Englanders from saying "hadn't ought to" when linguistic studies show that this grammatically "wrong" expression is used by nearly everyone in New England, educated or not? Or to try to remove "ain't" from the speech of Southerners, when it is generally accepted in the colloquial speech of cultivated persons in the South?

Thus far, a major fact established by atlas investigations is that although there's a popular idea of Northern and Southern speech, divided by the Mason and Dixon's line in the Eastern part of the country, there are, in fact, three distinct speech areas in the East. The third is a clear Midland dialect area between North and South, corresponding to the Pennsylvania settlement area of early days. The North-Midland speech boundary runs in a westerly direction from below Sandy Hook in New Jersey through northern Pennsylvania; the line separating Midland from South runs in a southwesterly direction from Dover, Delaware, through Baltimore and along the Blue Ridge in Virginia. And in the

Eastern states from Maine to South Carolina, linguistic geographers can plot 18 dialect divisions largely created by the original colonial settlements and the subsequent routes of migration.

This Eastern coastal area, oldest in point of settlement, still retains the nation's greatest diversity of speech from one community to another. But then, as the dialect divisions flow westward on the map—the way our population did—they begin to unravel, and strands of the three begin to overlap.

"Man takes his speech ways with him wherever he goes," Dr. Kurath explains. "The three main types of English were carried westward and blended into new regional varieties; new words were coined, old words came to be used in new senses, and words were borrowed from the Indian languages, from the German and Scandinavian languages spoken in the Midwest, and from the Spanish of the Southwest. But the main stock of English vocabulary in this country is nevertheless clearly derived from the earlier settlements on the Atlantic slope."

While the trend today is away from regional words and expressions, linguistic geographers don't anticipate complete uniformity in the speech of democratic America—where the way we talk, as well as the way we live, is based on the belief that men can be different, and still be equal.

"While some vocabulary and grammatical differences may disappear," says Dr. McDavid, "the differences in word pronunciation are likely to persist. I don't think anyone can impose a single set of patterns on Americans—for speech or for anything else."

Cryptic Comment

A cryptographer, full of elation,
Explained the enjoyment he showed:
"I relish," he said, "the sensation
Of having my nose in a code."

—JOYCE CARLILE

history, population shifts and the influence of foreign groups who may have settled there. McDavid wouldn't be surprised, for example, to hear a native of Hudson, New York, say he *ran afoul* of something, instead of *ran across* or *ran onto*. The seafaring expression comes naturally in Hudson because it was settled by whalers from Nantucket, Massachusetts.

Around Marietta, Ohio, he'd be prepared to hear people use such New England terms as *pail* instead of bucket, *chipmunk* instead of ground squirrel, and *boss!* instead of *sook* when they call a cow—although the second expressions are the more common elsewhere in Ohio. A New England commercial company once sent an entire community to Marietta early in its settlement days, so that linguists today call Marietta and its environs a Yankee "speech island."

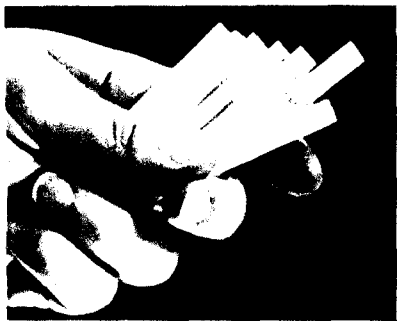
The linguistic geographer tries to talk to two distinct types of people in each community studied. The first type is an older person with family roots deep in the community, someone with limited education, and with few outside social contacts which might tend to blur or even erase certain localisms from his speech. The second type is younger, usually middle-aged, with more education and broader social contacts or travel experience. In some communities, a third type of informant—representing the "cultivated" speech of the community—is also interviewed. By sampling the speech of these three groups, the linguist can determine which local expressions are used by everyone in the community, which tend to disappear, and, if so, what replaces them as the community grows more educated or



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