

"Are You Uhmuricun or American?"

Language in United States Seems to Educator a Mass of Sounds Which Are Not Worthy of Being Considered Speech at All

By Clarence Stratton.

MAWN! Wheredjer getde coat?

"Scold-day."

"Betcha life. Hwayu?"

"Finesilk."

This may look Russian or some other Slavonic language, but it is not. It is merely phonographed American talk such as you may overhear on the trolley car, at the country club, or upon the church porch. It is "American as she is spoke" by millions of people who would indignantly resent any imputation that they speak some conglomerate mass of sounds not worthy of being considered any speech at all. They entirely overlook the fact that speaking one's mother language is more of a patriotic duty than casting a vote. They are the winners for the United States of the disagreeable reputation we suffer under of being the worst-bred nation boasting of a civilization. The great mass of Americans may assert that they think little of such criticisms, but to correct a man for ungrammatical speech or mispronunciation is as dangerous as to tell a woman she has too much powder on her nose.

This language trouble is not so marked among foreigners as one would suppose. Thanks to a spirit of ambition and docility in parents, the third and fourth generations of most desirables are many degrees above descendants of native-born Americans. In colleges it is often noticed that the purest English is written and spoken by foreigners, while the natives reproduce the slovenly, slangy, inaccurate dialects of the streets, the clubs, and the athletic fields. As they master and use the language these newcomers are becoming better and better Americans.

Our speech suffers because our wrongly interpreted democratic idea makes common people intolerant of anything like authority in everyday matters. The German acknowledges a standard of usage and pronunciation indicated by Hanoverian. In France and Spain academies determine currency and meaning, and the people recognize their decisions. Italians will quote to you the proverb that settles all linguistic standards for

them, "*La lingua Toscana in bocca Romana*"—the Tuscan speech upon the Roman tongue—the language molded by the best intellects of Italy spoken by the people of the political, religious, cosmopolitan centre of the world.

The Catalan, the Provençal, the Silesian, the Neapolitan, would never declare that his dialect is as good as that of any other districts; speak to him in his recognized literary tongue and he will respond in it, or if he lapses into his patois he will apologize abjectly. Can you picture an American apologizing to a Hollander, (the Dutch are almost as accomplished linguists as the Danes and Russians,) for his idiomatic use of "ain't," or reconstructing a sentence to avoid "It don't make any difference to me"?

With our implanted disregard of authority we have as many divergencies of pronunciation and phrasing as England with all her historic class distinctions or Italy with all her loosely amalgamated nationalities. If you are a New Englander and have the Boston hub delusion, you probably mark yourself by the way you say boat, coat, bonnet, onion, join, genuine; or having eradicated your nasals you are likely to lose control of your tongue at times and, letting it pop up against the roof of your mouth at the ends of words with vowel sounds, betray your provincialism by such monstrosities as lawr, drawr, arear, and, most frequent of all, idear. Surely for New Englanders the tongue is an unruly member. I know a New England poet who in a dignified sonnet on some glory of nature actually printed orchestra as rhyming with roar.

The Southerner departs furthest from the norm of good American speech with his drawling utterance, his radical change of accepted sounds, and his entire disregard of certain letters. More surprising than his speech is his satisfaction with it, and his spirited defense of its correctness and beauty. To a woman it adds a quality of childish "cuteness," exactly as a lisp might; it preserves the charm of girlhood prattle (perhaps.) But in a strapping man it sounds like "baby talk." In its origin it is negro talk and nothing more. It all goes back to the nurses of this generation.

Some thirty years ago it was fashion-

able (high-toned) not to sound the final letter in ing. Traces of this are still heard in the South. Some speakers are as untainted by any knowledge of its presence as the urchin in school who read the sentence, "The horse is runnin' down the street." The patient teacher requested, "Now, Willy, read that again, and don't forget the g." So he did his best; "Gee! the horse is runnin' down the street!"

The widespreading Middle West has been gradually freeing itself from Eastern domination in as many ways as possible. This district has, after years of diligent imitation and practice, produced a startling sound of a as flat as its prairies. You hear it in parent, which becomes parrunt; you hear it in fairy, now farry; in water as waater, and so on through a long list of words. Other districts have their peculiarities as well.

The Pacific Coast is a chop suey of all American dialects—have you ever heard two people from Los Angeles pronounce the name of their city alike? Pennsylvania inclines to nasals, with admixture of Pennsylvania Dutch colloquialisms. Louisiana and the adjacent territory telescope words, as, for example, the name of the Mardi Gras city sounds somewhat like N'Awluns. The characteristics of New York are beyond powers of reproduction anywhere except upon a thousand phonographic records.

No one, however careful, can flatter himself upon his infallibility. No one can goad his neighbor, no one can laugh at a mistake. All must learn by care and perseverance. Who is so sure of himself that he may not fall unguardedly into wuz, becuz, fer, ketch, sech, jest, yit, jewly, immedjately, wrastle, histry, mystry, libry, figger, dubate, uhgree, Febuary, and, most unpatriotic of all, Uhmuricun?

Was a dramatic critic justified when he petulantly declared he would have to go to London again to hear the word American pronounced properly on the stage?

Entirely aside from these phases of pronunciation and intonation, somewhat defensible by reasons of birth, habit, environment, locality, there are others more serious. If you are discriminating yourself, if you know the difference between incisive and decisive speaking, if you have been charmed by the quiet power of some unaffected wielder of a language

as beautiful as it is forceful, as graceful as it is resourceful, how your ears must be offended a thousand times a day!

It may not be gallant to tax women with insincerity, but we may fairly charge them with an unbridled extravagance of speech which matches their extravagance of dress. They practice unsupported exaggerations and false enthusiasms. They fill up pauses when they might take breath with reiterated "My dears." They have few degrees of personal preference, they love or adore everything, they are perfectly devoted to everybody. A few childish explosions convey their approval: "It's perfectly darling," or "I'm simply crazy about that." Add a few terms like "awful," "fierce," "grand," "nice," and you have the essentials of their offenses against American undefiled.

• Who is to blame? For years the public has been wagging a criticising finger at teachers in schools and colleges. But are the teachers alone to bear the blame? How accurate an arithmetician would a boy become if, after learning in school that seven fives are thirty-five, all the members of his family, all business men, and all the newspapers count seven fives as forty-two? An analogous result recurs daily in language. After a half hour's drill on the difference between "lay" and "lie," and mastering it, little Jimmy is told that night by his father to go lay down. Is that boy's speech to be visited upon the careworn teacher?

The time may arrive when the poor pedagogue will turn upon the demanding public and ask that, if he is to be held responsible, he receive a fair chance to insist upon the acceptance of his knowledge by the world at large. He may ask his critics to cast out first the beam in their own eyes before they attempt any surgical operations upon his own clear orbs. He may repudiate charges made by grosser offenders than any of his pupils. And he may do even more: he may mete unto others with the measures they have used, he may refuse to bow down to worship the golden calf who "knows it all" because he knows how to make money.

And he may, by persistent, if quiet, unheralded and badly rewarded "plowing to make a richer field," some day make a hundred millions of people agree that to be Uhmuricun is not to be American.