

# *Language Myths*

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PENGUIN BOOKS

## *In the Appalachians They Speak like Shakespeare*

Michael Montgomery

Every day thousands of motorists entering North Carolina stop at a highway welcome center for directions, refreshment or a break from the road. Until not long ago, while there they could also pick up a brief, complimentary booklet titled *A Dictionary of the Queen's English*, which was produced by the state's travel and tourism division in the mid 1960s. Its preface reads as follows:

*To outsiders it sounds strange, even uncultured. But what many North Carolinians do to the King's English was done centuries ago by the Queen.*

*The correspondence and writings of Queen Elizabeth I and such men as Sir Walter Raleigh, Marlowe, Dryden, Bacon and even Shakespeare are sprinkled with words and expressions which today are commonplace in remote regions of North Carolina.*

*You hear the Queen's English in the coves and hollows of the Blue Ridge and the Great Smoky Mountains and on the windswept Outer Banks where time moves more leisurely. (c1965: 2-3)*

Even for Americans unacquainted with this small publication, its existence comes as anything but a surprise. The idea that in isolated places somewhere in the country people still use 'Elizabethan' or 'Shakespearean' speech is widely held, and it is probably one of the hardier cultural beliefs or myths in the collective American psyche. Yet it lacks a definitive version and is often expressed in vague geographical and chronological terms. Since its beginning in the late nineteenth century the idea has most often been associated with the southern mountains – the Appalachians of North Carolina, Tennessee,

Kentucky and West Virginia, and the Ozarks of Arkansas and Missouri. At one extreme it reflects nothing less than a relatively young nation's desire for an account of its origins, while at the other extreme the incidental fact that English colonization of North America began during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I four centuries ago. Two things in particular account for its continued vitality: its romanticism and its political usefulness. Its linguistic validity is another matter. Linguists haven't substantiated it, nor have they tried, since the claim of Elizabethan English is based on such little evidence. But this is a secondary, if not irrelevant, consideration for those who have articulated it in print – popular writers and the occasional academic – for over a century. It has indisputably achieved the status of a myth in the sense of a powerful cultural belief.

Growing up in east Tennessee, this writer heard it said occasionally that people in the nearby mountains still spoke Elizabethan English (the location of the community was never specified), but if anything he has met the idea more often since leaving Tennessee twenty years ago. When people learn that he is a linguist who grew up near the mountains, they frequently ask, 'Isn't there supposed to be some place up there where they still speak Elizabethan English?' When asked, none could recall where they heard the idea or where the community was supposed to be. That people somewhere used Elizabethan speech was something that 'everybody just knows.'

In the United States it often forms part of a general characterization of the southern mountains as an idyllic, if rugged, locale where people have somehow been lost in time. Balladry, story-telling, traditional dancing and weaving are cited as archaic cultural features similarly preserved by people who have been isolated geographically and socially. An especially dreamy version of this appears in a 1929 article titled 'Elizabethan America' by Charles Morrow Wilson.

*We know a land of Elizabethan ways – a country of Spenserian speech, Shakespearean people, and of cavaliers and curtsies. It is a land of high hopes and mystic allegiances, where one may stroll through the forests of Arden and find heaths and habits like those of olden England.*

*We are speaking of the Southern highlands – Appalachia and*

Ozarkadia . . . Husbandmen and ploughmen in Shakespeare's England and present-day upland farmers could very likely have rubbed shoulders and swapped yarns with few misunderstandings, linguistic or otherwise; for Elizabethan English, as well as Elizabethan England, appears to have survived magnificently in these isolated Southern uplands.

The speech of the Southern mountains is a survival of the language of older days, rather than a degradation of the United States English . . . a surprisingly large number of old words have survived, along with a surprisingly large number of old ways, giving a quaint and delightful flavor of olden England. Illustrations are plentiful enough. The most casual of listeners will become conscious of the preponderance of strong preterites in mountain speech: *clum* for 'climbed', *drug* for 'dragged', *wropped* for 'wrapped', *fotch* for 'fetched', and *holp* for 'helped' – all sound Elizabethanisms to be found in Shakespeare, *Lovelace* or the King James Bible. The Southern uplander says *fur* (for) with Sir Philip Sidney, *furder* with Lord Bacon, and in common with Hakluyt, allow for 'suppose'. Like Chaucer, he forms the plurals of monosyllables ending in -st by adding -es: *postes*, *beastes*, *jystes* (joists), *nestes* and *ghostes*. Shakespearean-like, he probably calls a salad a *sallet*, a bag a *poke* and uses *antic* for 'careful' and *bobble* for 'mix-up' . . . (1929:238–39)

Wilson begins with such a far-fetched description that it's tempting not to take it seriously, but this passage is typical of many others. As with the miniature North Carolina dictionary cited earlier, Wilson cites writers and sources other than Shakespeare (especially Chaucer and the authorized version of the Bible). Though dating from very different centuries, these are alike in being highly prestigious texts, universally esteemed for their use of language. The 'Elizabethan English' cited is not the colorful language of Shakespeare and his contemporaries but rather common, down-to-earth verb forms like *clum* and *fotch*, which today would be considered rustic and uneducated, if not improper and illiterate. Wilson's list of words is longer than most others, but it's typical in being mainly verb past tenses, old-fashioned plurals and vocabulary that would probably not strike many as especially 'Shakespearean'.

It's not clear exactly when the idea of Shakespearean English in the

mountains was first articulated, but William Goodell Frost, President of Berea College in the east Kentucky mountains, was undoubtedly most influential in promoting and establishing the view that mountain speech and culture were legitimate survivals from older times. His 1899 essay, 'Our Contemporary Ancestors', was the published form of an address given for years to alumni and contributors to his college. In it he stated:

*The rude language of the mountains is far less a degradation than a survival. The [Old English] pronoun 'hit' holds its place almost universally. Strong past tenses, 'holp' for helped, 'drug' for dragged, and the like, are heard constantly; and the syllabic plural is retained in words ending in -st and others. The greeting as we ride up to a cabin is 'Howdy, strangers.' 'Light and hitch your beastes.' Quite a vocabulary of Chaucer's words, which have been dropped by polite lips but which linger in these solitudes, has been made out by some of our students. 'Pack' for carry, 'gorm' for muss, 'feisty' for full of life, impertinent, are examples.*

As the country experienced immigration from southern and eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century and its people became increasingly diverse, Frost and other writers focused attention on the fellow citizens of 'pure Anglo-Saxon' heritage who had yet to join the advance of American civilization. However, it was, they claimed, a misconception to view mountain people as neglected or deprived, because they had preserved much of the language and culture of the British Isles which the dominant, mainstream culture neither recognized nor valued, even though most of its own ancestors had spoken in like manner.

The Shakespearean English idea was formulated and promoted by people born and bred outside the mountains, first by educators and clergymen (Frost was both) and later by journalists and travel writers. Often these were individuals who, having come to know mountain people firsthand, wished to identify their positive qualities to a wider audience, to combat the distorted, negative images of mountain people popularized in the press. In the late nineteenth century, newspapers ran sensational stories about mountain feuding and moonshining,

just as today they periodically feature accounts of snake-handling religion, high homicide rates and endemic social deprivation. Modern-day Hollywood movies like *Deliverance* have done nothing to counter this image problem. Entering the mountains with such negative stereotypes, outsiders are surprised when they 'discover' the 'true' nature of mountain speech and write as if this were a revelation. Just three years ago the Lexington (KY) *Press-Herald* ran an article by a Midwestern schoolteacher who had taken a job in a tiny, eastern Kentucky community and found that his pupils to his amazement used many 'Shakespearean' and 'Chaucerian' expressions.

For these counter-propagandists, as we might call them, identifying the Elizabethan nature of mountain speech can be accomplished by citing a mere handful of words. The issue was one of perceptions and public relations, not of linguistics.

However, the contention that mountaineers talk like Shakespeare cannot withstand even a little objective scrutiny. Here are some reasons why:

First, relatively little evidence is cited in such accounts. Supporting examples are few and highly selective – often only half a dozen are used to make far-fetched assertions about mountain language as a whole. Words are often labeled as being 'Shakespearean' or 'Chaucerian' without an accompanying citation from those authors. Some are not traceable to the sixteenth century (for instance, the *Dictionary of Queen's English* cites *tee-toncey* 'tiny', in 'I'll have just a tee-toncey piece of pie' as Elizabethan).

Second, the evidence is not persuasive. Although they may not be known to the educated, middle-class, city-dwelling outsiders who write about Shakespearean English, the terms cited can usually be found in many parts of North America and the British Isles. Here are three examples, the third of which is especially common: *afeard* 'afraid' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* III.i.25: 'Will not the ladies be *afeard* of the lion?'); *holp* (*Richard III* I.ii.107: 'Let him thank me that *holp* to send him thither.');

and *learn* 'teach' (*Romeo and Juliet* III.ii.12: 'Learn me how to lose a winning match.')

Such shortcomings in using evidence do not restrain advocates of the

Shakespearean idea, which is not empirically based or systematically induced from facts.

Third, these accounts mix facts and images, places and times, even immigrant groups from very different parts of the British Isles. For instance, the English are sometimes lumped together with the Scotch-Irish (also called the Ulster Scots), something which amateur historians and genealogists would not do, as in the following passage, again from Charles Morrow Wilson:

*Broadly speaking, the Southern highlanders are an Old England folk, English and Scotch-Irish, whose forebears came forth from Elizabethan England, a nation of young life which had just found its prime, a nation of energy and daring, a nation leaping from childhood into manhood. And the spirit of Elizabethan England has long survived the weathering of time. The first settlers brought with them Elizabethan ways of living, and these ways have lasted in a country of magnificent isolation, one little touched by the ways of a modern world.*

'Elizabethan' is not used in the sense of 'the literary world of southern England in the latter half of the sixteenth century' or even 'England during the Renaissance'. Not only are immigrants from Ireland sometimes subsumed with those from England, but Chaucer (who flourished in the late fourteenth century), Dryden (in the late seventeenth) and writers from other periods are regularly cited as having used terms now employed by mountaineers. What the wide-ranging texts from which citations are drawn have in common is that they are familiar – and prestigious – canonical sources which used to be required reading in the schoolroom. (Thus they reveal more about the reading of promoters of the Shakespearean idea than about mountain speakers.)

Shakespeare and Elizabeth I lived 400 years ago, but the southern mountains have been populated by Europeans for only half that length of time. The settlers who came to North America during Elizabeth I's reign either did not survive or did not stay (the first permanent colony, Jamestown, was founded under James I). Since no one came directly

from Britain to the Appalachians, we wonder how they preserved their English during the intervening period. The more one reads, the less concrete meaning 'Elizabethan' and 'Shakespearean' have. In the popular mind they appear to mean nothing more than 'old-fashioned'.

Fourth, writers make other sweeping and improbable statements, such as that mountain children have a natural affinity for Shakespeare:

*It is said that when the mountaineer begins to read all, he displays so marked a preference for Shakespeare that it is invariably the works of that poet that have most frequently to be rebound in any library to which he has access. The reason he himself gives for this predilection is that the things Shakespeare makes his characters do always seem so 'natural'. (William Aspenwall Bradley, In Shakespeare's America, 1915:436)*

More recently a flatlander who took a job as a schoolteacher in the North Carolina mountains became convinced of the Elizabethan English idea and gave his first-grade pupils Shakespeare to read, with predictably dismal results, and a scholar writing a book on producing Shakespeare in North Carolina found that theater directors and critics believed that Shakespearean language was most intelligible in the western part of the state because it was closer to the everyday speech there (Champion, 1983).

Fifth, writers routinely characterize large areas of the mountains as homogeneous, as though there were no regional and social differences. Though Elizabethan speech came to Appalachia indirectly, if it came at all, this has not prevented commentators from often labeling it 'pure'. In North Carolina, according to one writer, mountaineers use a variety of English that has forms reminiscent of Shakespeare and Chaucer and is 'purely "American"'. In Kentucky, according to another, 'the purest English on earth' is spoken.

Finally, the Shakespearean English idea ignores many things that linguists know to be true. All varieties of language change, even isolated ones and, contrary to popular impression, mountain culture has been far from isolated over the past two centuries. In vocabulary, mountain speech actually has far more innovations (terms not known in the

old country) than hold-overs from the British Isles. The Shakespeare myth reflects simplistic, popular views about the static nature of traditional folk cultures, especially those in out-of-the-way places.

With so many inconsistencies and problems, no wonder that American scholars have little interest in assessing how 'Elizabethan' Appalachian speech is. Scholars would say that mountain speech has more archaisms than other types of American English, but that's about it. They certainly wouldn't put a label like 'Elizabethan' on it. But believers have no logical difficulty generalizing from a handful of words to a blanket label. Especially for them the idea of Shakespearean English has become a myth, actually a combination of two myths, an origin myth claiming to explain where mountain culture came from and a myth of the noble savage which satisfies our nostalgia for a simpler, purer past, which may never have existed but which we nevertheless long for because of the complexities and ambiguities of modern life. All of this helps innumerable Americans who have no direct experience of the mountains and who consider themselves thoroughly rational people to believe that Elizabethan English is spoken there.

The idea that somewhere in the mountains people preserve a type of speech from the days of Shakespeare is more than just a romanticization of mountain life by outsiders. Many natives believe it too, associating it with the mountains in general or at least with older, less educated people. Most likely they have picked it up from schoolteachers, and sometimes they turn it to their advantage. If you ask Charles Bradley, mayor of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, in the late nineties the self-styled 'Captain of the Smoky Mountains', what distinguishes mountain people, he'll tell you immediately that they've hung on to Elizabethan English. For insiders, the Shakespearean English idea fills a variety of purposes: foremost, affirmation that their culture has respectable, even reputable roots, but also the promotion of tourism, a college (William Goodell Frost) or even a political career. In his autobiography, *The Mountains Within Me*, Zell Miller, Governor of Georgia in the late nineties, actually names the community he describes and claims that he himself talks like Shakespeare:

*If Shakespeare could have been reincarnated in Nineteenth Century*

*Choestoe [GA], he would have felt right at home. The open fireplaces, spinning wheels, handmade looms, Greek lamps and good, if sometimes ungrammatical, Elizabethan English would all have been quite familiar to the Bard of Avon and, with the exception of having to adapt to homespun clothes, he would have had little difficulty assimilating into mountain society . . . It no longer bothers me to be kidded about my mountain expressions. In fact, I have come to regard them as status symbols because who else do we have running around in public life today who speaks the language of Chaucer and Shakespeare as distilled, literally and figuratively, by two centuries of Georgia Mountain usage?*

For mountain people the idea appears to be as prevalent as ever.

The Shakespearean English idea argues that isolation and the lack of modern education have caused words and meanings to survive in the mountains identical to ones used in the Elizabethan period, often considered the liveliest and richest flowering of literature in the language. These have either disappeared from mainstream/dominant culture or become labeled as illiterate or vulgar by it. Because their ancestry is forgotten or misunderstood, their modern-day speakers are wrongly labeled. At the same time, mainstream culture has lost its awareness of its own roots, those who espouse the Shakespeare idea seem to be saying.

Being a cultural repository has helped regions like Appalachia and the Ozarks define themselves against mainstream cultures that possess immense socio-economic power and prominence. Though lacking a cultural memory and having no conscious roots of its own other than a few two-dimensional, textbook images, mass American culture has created an ideology that dominates regional and ethnic cultures and articulates and imparts a value system through the media, the educational system and a variety of institutions. Less well endowed economically and absent from the pages of the nation's history, regional cultures find themselves marginalized by modern nation states, centralized institutions and educational establishments. Consequently, their speech is viewed by those in power as rustic, if not backward and uncouth. As much as anything else, it is this lack of status (both in North America and the British Isles – where it is most commonly

associated with Ireland) that has led people to elaborate and advocate the 'Shakespearean myth' to bring status and recognition to these cultures.

This explains perhaps why for Appalachia there have been so many expositions of the same idea decade after decade. Advancing the idea, improbable as it is, that mountain people speak like Shakespeare counters the prevailing ideology of the classroom and society at large that unfairly handicaps rural mountain people as uneducated and unpolished and that considers their language to be a corruption of proper English. This modern ideology not only forms the backdrop against which the Shakespearean myth is articulated, but ironically it turns the history of the language on its head by dismissing its 'ancient legitimate lineage', as one writer called it not long ago (Hays 1975).

One of the most interesting aspects of the subject is the contrast between images, at least in Appalachia. Even today the name of the region conjures up images of poor diets, proneness to violence and countless other chronic ills, and social psychologists into the present generation have labored to examine the region in terms of deprivation theory. There is an obvious tension between heavily romanticized images and the jarringly negative ones, each being a product of selection of features.

Without a cultural memory, mainstream culture has little perspective to understand the true origin of mountain culture, whether this is Elizabethan or anything else, and it sometimes makes for profound misapprehensions. This calls for cultural education, which should begin locally but which at some point will probably run counter to mainstream society because it is the latter which usually chooses what is to be valued and what is not. The regional or ethnic culture has little, if any, role in the evaluation of itself. The evaluation made by mass society often produces a schizophrenia, especially among upwardly mobile members of a regional or minority culture, as they are asked to choose between two value systems and ways of talking. Mountain people may talk like Shakespeare, but in the schoolroom nothing should be permitted but 'standard English'.

At the beginning of this essay the idea of Shakespearean English being spoken today, on the eve of the third millennium, probably

appeared to be something between nostalgia and a fable. But it has been a very persistent idea, and commentators a century ago did identify the crux of the matter – that natives of the mountains deserve respect as culture bearers – even though they did not contextualize it in terms of a socio-economic dynamic. They recognized some of its educational implications, however questionable its validity was in reality. Today Americans have almost no awareness of the roots of their English, and whatever respect they may have for regional cultures often does not extend to regional speech. All this means that there's definitely a place for the Shakespearean myth as an educational and political tool for the foreseeable future. Since it reflects only a small portion of reality, it would be wise for linguists to play a role in working out its pedagogical applications, but even they must appreciate that it has achieved the status of a myth.

## *Some Languages Have No Grammar*

Winifred Bauer

It is not uncommon to hear people say (usually derogatorily) of a language 'It doesn't have any grammar.' To appreciate the absurdity of this statement, it is helpful to specify what 'grammar' is. For linguists, the 'grammar' of a language is the set of rules which the speakers of the language follow when they speak. It encompasses rules about the possible forms of words (*shplernk* is not a possible word in English), rules about the way bits of words can be put together (you can't make plurals in English by putting the *-s* first), rules about the way words are put together to make longer units (in English you have to say *This is an interesting book*, not *A book interesting is this*) and rules about the way meanings are encoded by speakers. For some non-linguists, 'grammar' refers only to the second and third of these types of rules. Even on that narrower definition, it is easy to demonstrate that all languages have grammar.

For argument's sake, let us discuss the proposition 'Spelitzian has no grammar.' I shall demonstrate that this cannot be true by considering what Spelitzian would be like if it were true.

If Spelitzian had no grammar, it would be impossible to make a mistake when speaking Spelitzian. Saying that a sentence is wrong in Spelitzian is the same as saying that it breaks a rule or rules of Spelitzian. If Spelitzian has rules, then it has grammar.

If Spelitzian had no grammar, there could be no difference between nouns and verbs or other word classes. There could be no pronouns, because they – by definition – stand for nouns, not verbs, and thus imply a distinction between the classes. If it is possible to distinguish word classes in Spelitzian, Spelitzian has grammar. All known human languages distinguish at least nouns and verbs.