

**SOME PECULIARITIES
OF SPEECH IN
MISSISSIPPI**

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Some peculiarities of speech in Mississippi by H. A. Shands

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H. A. SHANDS, A.M.

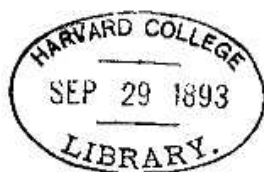
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PREFACE.

IN this paper, written as a thesis for procuring the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Mississippi, my object is to collect, and as far as possible to explain, those dialect words and phrases that are peculiar to, or very common in, the State of Mississippi.

Many difficulties present themselves at the outset. No previous study of this special subject has, within the knowledge of the writer, been made, so that completeness is almost a matter of impossibility. The writer must depend upon the conversation of those with whom he is thrown, for whatever specimens of dialect he secures, and consequently must fall far short of obtaining all, or even a majority, of the dialectical peculiarities of his section.

The derivation of nearly every colloquial expression is doubtful, and must be, for the most part, simply conjectural. In many instances, words have been so warped from their original forms and meanings, that even a guess at their origin is hazardous; but, on the other hand, a few readily disclose to the careful observer the various changes that occurred before they reached their present form in colloquial speech.

In the discussion that follows, I have omitted those words and expressions that have been introduced into Mississippi by foreign immigrants, for the reason that the same peculiarities have been made known by them to every other portion of the United States. And while it doubtless would be interesting to discuss such additions to our speech, still they could in nowise be said to pertain especially to Mississippi.

I have thought it best to leave out also the majority of the provincialisms that are noted as common by Bartlett or other lexicographers. As it is the object of this paper to give evidence of

original research, it seems to me useless to repeat accounts already given by the dictionary-makers.

I have endeavored to exclude purely slang phrases, such as, "to get on his ear," "I should smile," "on it," "in it," etc. Such phrases as are consciously used by the speaker as slang, I do not regard as a part of the dialect of the State, and hence desire to give them no place in this paper. However, it is very difficult to always determine just what expressions are slang and what are not, so that I may have erred both in excluding some and in including others.

In treating the dialect of the State, I have tried to distinguish three constituent elements, — the cultivated white, the illiterate white, and the negro dialects. Of course, all three have many words in common, still they are in many respects essentially distinct; and, in treating each word separately, I have taken especial care to indicate by what class of people it is used. Where no class is named, it is to be understood that the word is used by all.

The phonetic system employed is that of the American Dialect Society: all words enclosed in parentheses are spelled according to that system.

In preparing this treatise, I have consulted Bartlett's "Dictionary of Americanisms," Earle's "Philology of the English Tongue," Cook's "Sievers' Grammar of Old English," Sweet's "History of English Sounds," and the standard dictionaries of the language.

It now remains only for me to express my thanks to the writers in "Dialect Notes," from whom I have ventured to take a great deal of assistance in the way of words treated and comparisons suggested. I also owe and hereby acknowledge gratitude to several friends in the State who have been so kind as to furnish me with lists of words in their neighborhoods. And most of all do I thank my highly esteemed and learned teacher, Rev. William Rice Sims, Ph.D., who has so kindly assisted me by his valuable suggestions and scholarly advice, and Professor H. Schmidt-Wartenberg, Ph.D., Professor of Modern Languages in this University, who has assisted me in my work by useful notes and revision.

H. A. S.

UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI,
March 1, 1883.

SOME PECULIARITIES OF SPEECH IN MISSISSIPPI.



GENERAL DISCUSSION OF VOWEL AND CONSONANT SOUNDS.

IN discussing the vowel changes, I shall pay attention to the sounds rather than to the individual letters; since, in the English language, so many different vowels represent the same sound, and so many sounds are represented by one vowel, that in some instances it is impossible to determine just which letter should be written.

In both the vowel and consonant changes there are many isolated examples that cannot possibly be brought under any general rule, — changes that may have been developed through forms now unhappily lost, or that may have originated from analogy with some other word, not readily ascertained. Some of these changes seem to be mere caprices of the language; and being unable to explain them, I do not, in the majority of instances, attempt it.

However, before proceeding to the detailed discussion of these several changes, I feel that I ought to call attention to the fact that the dialect of the illiterate whites of the extreme backwoods districts possesses a characteristic that cannot be adequately represented by written characters, — a kind of drawling nasal twang. This can be fully understood and appreciated only by hearing this class of people talk.

The enclosing of a word or letter in parentheses indicates that it is to be spelled or pronounced according to the phonetic system of the American Dialect Society.

A (a).

§ 1. a) When final, this *a* is pronounced by negroes and illiterate whites as short *i*; as, (Lindi) for *Linda*, (Mairi) for *Mira*, (Minisoti) for *Minnesota*, (sôti) for *sofa*, (sôdi) for *soda*, — an example of the weakening of the strong vowels that has already played so prominent a part in the history of our language.

b) This vowel (a), when coming after the palatals *c* and *g*, is changed into *ia* or *ya*; as, *gyarden* for *garden*, *cyar* for *car*, *cyarpet* for *carpet*, *gyardeen* for *guardian*. This usage is most common among the illiterate, but is prevalent also among the immigrants from Virginia and South Carolina, whatever may be their education.

This is akin to the usual effect of the palatals on this vowel in Anglo-Saxon: "the palatal semi-vowel *j*, when beginning a word, unites with the vowels *a*, *æ*, *o*, to form *gea* and *geo*. . . . The palatals *g*, *c*, and *sc* have a similar effect." — SIEVERS, pp. 38, 39; §§ 74, 75.

The change of *a* into *ya* under these circumstances is also a cockney pronunciation, and was very common in England about a century ago, according to the best orthoepists.

c) The same (a) sound becomes (æ) in the words: (pæpi) for *papa*, (pæsl) for *parcel*, (pætridʒ) for *partridge*, (stæəs) for *stars*, (æə) for *are*. All of these belong to the dialects of the negroes and the illiterate whites. By them the (æ) sound is given also to the vowels in *launch*, *haunch*, *saunter*, *haunt*, *aunt*, and nearly all similar words. This last list of words is not correctly pronounced by any class of Mississippians, as the vast majority of the educated people make the vowel sound as (a).

Among the educated classes *palm*, *calm*, *psalm*, *qualm*, and similar words are correctly pronounced, but the illiterate of both colors pronounce the *a* as (æ). This change occurs in almost every instance before either a liquid or a nasal, but I do not think that these consonants could be said to produce the change.

d) In the words *scrofula*, *cupola*, and *fistula* for *scrofula*, *cupola*, and *fistula*, the uneducated make (ô) of this (a).

A (æ).

§ 2. a) This sound of *a* becomes (a) in (bal) for *barrel*, (ma) for *mare*, (ra) for *rare*, (præ) for *prayer*, (ba) for *bare*, (da) for

dare. All of these words are used both by negroes and illiterate whites. It seems that this change occurs only before *r*, as I can find no instance of it under other circumstances. *R* in these words is not a guttural, but a vocal continuant (Evans). This vocal continuant has been entirely dropped from the pronunciation, and this disappearance has doubtless caused the change from (æ) to (a).

b) (æ) becomes (o) in (tʃɔmp) for *champ*, (stɔmp) for *stamp*, (trɔmp) for *tramp*; but this pronunciation is not universal before *mp*, as is evinced by the fact that the regular (æ) sound is given in *camp, hump, lamp, damp, sample*. The pronunciation of (æ) as (o) belongs more especially to the negro dialect, but it is sometimes used by the whites of both classes.

c) The (æ) sound is changed to (e) in (keridʒ) for *carriage*, (hed) for *had*, (rediʃ) for *radish*, (ken) for *can*, — all of which belong to the negro dialect. I think that no general rule can be formulated for this change, as, in words very similar, (æ) has its proper sound. In the words (keridʒ) for *carriage*, (keri) for *carry*, (skeəs) for *scarce*, (skeə) for *scare*, (tʃeə) for *chair*, (keə) for *cave*, the (æ) is changed to (e), probably through the influence of the preceding palatal or the following *r*. All of these last-named words belong to the negro or the illiterate white dialect.

d) (æ) is changed to (ɛ) in (skɛs) for *scarce*, to (o) in *wheelborrow* for *wheelbarrow*, and (stɔb) for *stab*, to (v) in *ruther* for *rather*. It appears somewhat strange that negroes should say (stɔb) for *stab*, and should pronounce *slab, scrap, trap, grab* correctly.

A (ɑ).

§ 3. The sound of *a* denoted by (ɑ) as in *past, fast*, is commonly pronounced by all classes as (æ): (æsk) for *ask*, (pæs) for *pass*, (fæst) for *fast*, (læst) for *last*, (græs) for *grass*, (cæf) for *calf*, (hæf) for *half*, (pæθ) for *path*. A large number of examples of this pronunciation could be given, as it is almost universal in such words. A few educated people — but a very few — give this vowel the correct pronunciation. The words ending in *lf*, as *half, calf*, are probably correctly pronounced more often than the others.