




Book Review

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Ingrid Paulsen, *The Emergence of American English as a Discursive Variety: Tracing Enregisterment Processes in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Newspapers*. Berlin: Language Science Press, 2022. Pp. vi+450. eBook open access, ISBN: 978-3-96110-338-6

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When did American English begin? A simple answer might look to the period when English speakers began arriving in this continent, while acknowledging that a distinct dialect did not arise immediately in the early 17th century. If the question is about when the English spoken in America came to differ from the English of Britain, we might consider the evidence that begins to proliferate in the 18th century. However, American English is more than a set of usages that may be objectively documented; like other dialects, it exists as a folk-linguistic construct, a form of language that is perceived in contrast to others. The question of the birth of American English in this sense drives Ingrid Paulsen's inquiry in this book.

Paulsen seeks to track how American English emerged as a 'discursive variety', which is an abstract construct based in speakers' ideas about language, in contrast to a 'structural variety', which is defined by distributions of differences of the type analyzed by linguists (p. 27). The distinctiveness of American English as a structural variety was evident in the colonial period, but it was only in the 19th century that it arose as a discursive variety according to Paulsen. In describing the process of emergence, Paulsen observes, 'Language itself can become the topic of discourse through reflexive activities and a reflexive model of speech is constructed by actors typifying linguistic forms and making these typifications heard by other actors' (p. 81). These 'typifications' include vocabulary choices and pronunciations that mark speakers as representatives of some social group, and the book presents a study of how certain usages came to operate in this process of constructing a popular notion of American English.

Paulsen frames her project as intervening in several fields including sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and discourse linguistics. She references theories of how new varieties emerge with a focus on contrasting Trudgill's (2004) model of new-dialect formation with Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model related to post-colonial Englishes. Given how Trudgill downplays the role of social factors in this process, it comes as no surprise that Paulsen, who has set out to examine American English as a social construct, aligns her thinking more with Schneider. To build on Schneider's insights, the project engages deeply with concepts such as indexical order and enregisterment developed by anthropologists Michael Silverstein and Asif Agha. Thus, Paulsen is interested in how social meanings attach to linguistic forms and how language operates as a form of social action. Enregisterment refers to the process by which linguistic forms come to be emblematic of particular identities and function in recognized styles or varieties of language. (e.g., wine talk, Pittsburghese). This is the process under investigation in the book.

In order to explore how American English was enregistered as a discursive variety, Paulsen must examine the discourse from the period, and she chooses newspapers as her window into this culture. She draws on two large electronic databases that together represent around 1200 publications from across the country. As an initial step, she pulled articles featuring the phrase 'American language'. From these pieces she developed a set of search terms related to salient linguistic usages. Included here are unconventional spellings meant to illustrate certain pronunciations. For example,

the search term ‘hinglish’ (for *English*) identifies articles that caricature British speech emphasizing its h-dropping and unetymological h-insertion. Similarly, ‘dawnce’ (for *dance*) represents a back-vowel pronunciation in short-a words resulting from the TRAP-BATH split in the South of England. She explores five such phonological variables as well as two lexical contrasts (viz. *baggage/luggage*, *pants/trousers*). It is not clear why she landed on these particular features (and these spellings used as search terms) and rejected other possibilities, but they are well represented in the discourse. Paulsen constructs a corpus of hundreds of newspaper items (articles, cartoons, poems, etc.) featuring one or more of the search terms that target these seven linguistic usages.

Paulsen provides a quantitative sketch of the dataset she explores. She documents the frequency of the various usages calculated in multiple ways with the goal of establishing their salience in the discourse about language at the time. She also provides figures to track the geographical distribution of the newspapers contributing to this discourse. These results confirm that such pieces were popular across the country. A more intriguing set of findings emerges from her chronological analysis. The search terms appear with very limited frequency in the first half of the century, but their popularity later expands with some showing large spikes in the 1880s and 1890s. This serves as important evidence in pinning down the timing of the emergence of this discursive variety and its connection to the stages in Schneider’s model for post-colonial Englishes.

In discussing the results, the bulk of the presentation consists of a qualitative analysis of the discourse constructed by the linguistic usages. Paulsen explains her goal as identifying ‘how indexical links between the phonological [and lexical] forms and social values as well as social personae are created’ (p. 177). She pursues this objective by working through several examples of newspaper items containing each search term. Typically, her explication involves reviewing the content of the piece (sometimes with a line-by-line recapitulation) with comments about particular linguistic usages and how they are deployed in the piece to mark social meanings. Paulsen references a number of social types or ‘personae’ that are represented in this corpus. Among the more popular is the dude, a figure that emerges later in the century. The dude is an object of ridicule for his upper-class pretensions and affectations. Imitation of English speech norms plays a key role in these representations. Thus, the dude is quoted as using ‘dawnce’ (along with ‘cawn’t and ‘pawth’) and omitting post-vocalic /r/ in words like ‘caw’, ‘nevah’ and the address form ‘deah fellah’, which Paulsen uses as one of the search terms. The phonological feature of non-rhoticity also appears in representations of other social personae that Paulsen identifies. Indeed, the search term ‘bettah’ (for *better*) returns the most articles, and her analysis of this material demonstrates that non-rhoticity is associated with Black Americans, Southerners and mountaineers in addition to dudes. Curiously, many of the white characters portrayed as non-rhotic come from dialect regions where rhoticity is (and has always been) the norm (e.g., Kentucky,

Pennsylvania and St. Louis). Paulsen does not explore questions of authenticity in this case nor in relation to the portrayal of Black speech where other dialectologically unexpected usages appear.

The discussion of the lexical variables proceeds in this same vein though their role in constructing sociolinguistic difference is more straightforward. There are examples where *luggage* is mentioned as the English equivalent of American *baggage* though usually as a matter-of-fact observation lacking the mocking tone found with the phonological forms. While *pants* vs. *trousers* is widely known today as distinguishing American from British English, Paulsen finds that the distinction was commonly framed as one of formality in the 19th century.

In interpreting the results, Paulsen argues that the popular conception of American English was constructed around three central indexical values: (1) nationality, which delimits American English from British English (p. 379), (2) authenticity, which delimits authentic from inauthentic American English (p. 384), and (3) non-specificity, which delimits a general American English from specific dialects (p. 389). This framework serves to bring together the various strains of evidence. It is noteworthy how relatively few of the cases pertain to perceived differences along national lines. The relevance of the many cases highlighting differences within American English by speakers from different regions or social types comes into focus with Paulsen’s appeal to the non-specificity value. As she contends, ‘linguistic differences were imagined at the same time because the existence of sets of forms to index specific (groups of) speakers was indispensable to the existence of a set of forms that could be imagined as indexing all Americans’ (p. 392). The book concludes by considering the implications of the study for linguists, anthropologists, and historians of the language with particular emphasis on theories of enregisterment and how that process operates in the creation of new varieties of English.

By way of overall assessment, I note that Paulsen certainly achieves her objective of shining new light on the process by which American English was enregistered in the 19th century. There are important insights here for researchers in sociolinguistics and related fields. However, the book presents some hurdles to accessing those valuable insights. Though it is not acknowledged explicitly, it appears that this book has its origins in Paulsen’s doctoral dissertation. It certainly reads like a PhD thesis. Thus, it features a literature review that lays a theoretical foundation for the project in a chapter of over 100 pages. In a similar vein, I found the level of detail in the qualitative analysis exhausting at times. A cartoon with a caption of three lines might be explicated across two pages, and so the section in which Paulsen analyzes the results related to the five phonological forms spans over 150 pages. It is useful to have a rich collection of examples included in the study, although the key observations could be made more concisely and with fewer examples discussed in the main text. A different publisher likely would have exerted editorial pressure to address these concerns. Nevertheless, like other books coming from Language Science Press, Paulsen’s is professionally designed and well

copy-edited, and she is to be commended for choosing to publish the book with open access.

References

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