Good evening. It’s a real pleasure for me to be part of this conference, with its exploration of non-standard dialects, both those that are thriving and those that are threatened. It’s particularly pleasant for me to be in the Atlantic Provinces, because I have been treated to tantalizing tastes of this part of the world through its regional dictionaries for nearly thirty years.

The *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, first published by George Story, William Kirwin, and J.D.A. Widdowson in 1982, was given by its authors to the staff of the DARE project several years before our first volume was published. In many ways it served as a model for how we might treat similar (or even the same) words, and it definitely gave us hope that our project too, could ultimately see the light of day.

Six years later, in 1988, when Terry Pratt’s *Dictionary of Prince Edward Island English* was published, we were similarly encouraged. Here was another very carefully researched and presented regional dictionary that reinforced the value of dialect lexicography and that appealed to people’s legitimate pride in their local ways of speaking.

And before too long, I anticipate being similarly pleased with the publication of the *Dictionary of Cape Breton English*, under way right here in Sydney by Bill Davey and Richard MacKinnon, two of the organizers of this conference.

Although few people make it a practice to read the prefaces and acknowledgments of dictionaries, lexicographers are an exception. And I read and took comfort in Terry Pratt’s acknowledgment of George Story’s advice to him, which was, “Do not listen to counsels of perfection.”

Try as we may (and try as we do), lexicographers, like other scholars, are destined ultimately to discover that annoying typo, that misattributed source, or, worse, that failure of insight. Nevertheless, we are proud to have done our fieldwork, gathered and sorted quotations, identified headwords, organized senses, written definitions, and proofread the text (and proofread the text, and proofread the text once again).

At DARE, we have just finished that painstaking proofreading process for the nearly 1,300 pages of the final volume of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. This fifth volume of text, which goes from Sl through Z (slab through zydeco, to be specific) is now in production and will be published by Harvard University Press in March of 2012.

As that date approaches, and as I think about the journalists who will want quick sound bites to encapsulate this five-volume, fifty-year endeavor, I’ve been thinking about how to answer the question I know to be inevitable: “Isn’t American English being homogenized by the media and the fact that we’re such a mobile population?” So the
theme of this conference, “Language on the Outer Edge,” with its exploration of non-standard dialects and the factors that either threaten or sustain them, is germane to the question I’ll be facing very soon: “Are American English dialects dying out?”

The question has, of course, come up before. A couple of years ago there was a very nice Associated Press article about DARE that got a lot of play across the nation. In addition to appearing widely in print and online, it also generated a large number of radio interviews, from local stations, to CBS, to NPR, to the BBC. And there were lots of spinoff articles reacting to the AP article, in which journalists took the opportunity to celebrate whatever local words were dear to the hearts of their readers. These were fun to see, and they reinforced the point that regional terms are indeed still used, recognized, and cherished.

One article, though, caught me by surprise. It was called “Words that fail the test of time,” appearing in The Financial Times of London (March 27, 2009:13). Christopher Caldwell, an American, was the author. I’d like to quote some of his remarks to you, as we explore whether dialects are really being “homogenized.”

Caldwell wrote,

This book is beloved of columnists and autodidacts. . . .
William Safire . . . told a reporter that Dare . . . “shows the richness and diversity of our language”.

But is this really true? Is American English really that rich and diverse? What diversity it has is certainly on prominent display, but that is only because American English has . . . been standardised by mass media and the bureaucratisation of working life. It is thus—if you measure it on a per-speaker or per-acre basis—remarkably un-diverse. It is astonishingly dialect-free . . . . (2009:13)

Then, a bit later,

A good many of the curiosities that Dare lays out are not really dialectal. They are words that immigrants use in their transition out of one language and into another. What could be less interesting than to learn that people in the Swedish-settled areas of the upper Midwest use the word “lutefisk” . . . to mean dried fish? This is a word that will either disappear or be thoroughly integrated into mainstream English. It is no more a sign of the richness and diversity of English than words such as spaghetti or wiener schnitzel. (2009:13)

Had Christopher Caldwell ever lived in Minnesota or Wisconsin, or even traveled through the region in the weeks before Christmas, when local churches have their lutefisk dinners, he would recognize that lutefisk is not only a very nice regionalism, it is also a cultural icon. And although many more people now know about lutefisk because of Garrison Keillor’s stories on “A Prairie Home Companion,” the word is distinctly unlikely ever to be “thoroughly integrated into mainstream English”; but it is equally unlikely to disappear, because its status as a marker of identity, not just for people of Scandinavian descent, but also for Upper Midwesterners in general, is firmly entrenched.
There’s a copy of the *DARE* map for *lutefisk* on the second page of your handout, so this is a good time for me to mention those strange-looking maps. As the first page of the handout explains, *DARE*’s map has been adjusted to reflect population density of the states as of the 1960 census rather than to show purely geographic relationships among the states. So Connecticut, which is a very small state in terms of square miles but has a large population, has been enlarged on the *DARE* map, while New Mexico, which is a very large state with a very small population, has been shrunk to a sliver. On the whole, though, the states retain their general shapes.

The map shows where *lutefisk* was given in answer to two questions: one asked about dishes made with meat, fish, or poultry that people in the community would know but that other people would not be familiar with; and the other asked about foreign foods that people in the community favored. As you can see, the dots cluster in the Upper Midwest and the North Central states, especially Minnesota and Wisconsin, and the term is only rarely found elsewhere.

Caldwell went on to explain that the fieldwork for *DARE* was done between 1965 and 1970 and that there was an emphasis on interviewing older people. He said:

This backward focus is an implicit admission that, in the television age (and even more in the internet age), quirks of language melt away like butter on a stove. Dare might more accurately be called a historical dictionary. Its main use will be for clarifying obscure references in old oral histories. (2009:13)

Well, yes! *DARE* is most certainly a historical dictionary, and one of its purposes was to record words that were going out of use. But Caldwell seems to have a skewed notion of what a historical dictionary does. There is no attempt to eschew the contemporary in a historical dictionary. And there are no cutoff dates that allow only for inclusion of “funny old stuff” in a historical dictionary. When Volume V of *DARE* is published in March, there will be quotations from 2011 as well as examples from 1700, not to mention all the years in between.

As for words “melting away like butter on a stove” because of the influence of television and the internet, well, not exactly. Do some words go out of use over time? Of course. Do some local terms get supplanted by commercial names that have succeeded in nationwide dominance? Certainly.

Let’s take a look at some examples: One of the questions in the *DARE* Questionnaire was, “When eggs are taken out of the shells and cooked in boiling water, you call them ____.” (I expect that you would probably call them *poached eggs*, as did most of the *DARE* Informants.) But we also had examples of *pouched eggs* (a nice folk-etymology), *porched eggs* (found chiefly in the South and South Midland, especially frequently among speakers with grade school education or less, and more common among women than men), and *proached eggs* (heard chiefly in the South, and especially frequently among African-Americans). But we also discovered that in New England, poached eggs were often called *dropped eggs*. Not only was this a very striking regionalism, as you can see on your handout, but it had an interesting social distribution as well. Of the 41 people who offered this term for a poached egg, 33 were older than 60 at the time of the fieldwork (between 1965 and 1970). So it seems very likely that if we were to go to the same communities again, and ask the same question of people who had also lived there
all their lives, very few (if any) would give the response dropped egg.

We don’t know why some words simply go out of fashion. Perhaps a new emphasis on sophisticated cooking, spurred by the publication of books such as *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (the first volume in 1961 and the second in 1970) might have made dropped egg sound homely and uncultivated; perhaps restaurants stopped calling them dropped eggs and switched to poached eggs. We’ll probably never know. But it is true that words sometimes disappear, whether because the thing itself goes out of use, or because another term simply begins to feel more appropriate.

At another point in the DARE Questionnaire we asked two questions about how water is collected from the roof and taken to the ground. We asked, “What hangs below the edge of the roof to carry off rain-water?” and “What’s the name of the pipe that takes the collected rain-water down to the ground or to a storage tank?” For the first question, the most common response was gutters, but we also had nice concentrations of eaves(s):spouts, eaves troughs (or trofts, troths), rain spouts, spouting, troughs, and water troughs. We also had six examples of leaders. For the question about the pipe that takes the water to the ground, downspout was the most common response, but we also had such terms as drainpipe, eave spout, rain spout, spout, and water spout. Again, the term leader appeared. There were 24 examples of leader and four of leader pipe. So we mapped all those leaders and discovered the very nice distribution shown on the map on your handout. You can see that, with one stray exception in Iowa, all the responses are from southeastern New York, northern New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, and a few places in Connecticut and Rhode Island. This is the kind of map we love to find. And the written citations supported the regionality, with the first one from southeastern New York in an 1868 issue of *Putnam’s Magazine*. Other examples were found in the *Linguistic Atlas of New England*, and we had a singleton from the *Wisconsin English Language Survey*.

But as was true with our dropped egg distribution, in the case of leader, 26 of 30 Informants were old at the time of the fieldwork. So again I suspect that if we were to replicate the fieldwork today, leader responses would be few and far between. But here it is easier to understand why: a look at trade magazines shows that by the early 1970s, gutters had become the standard term for carpenters, roofers, and their suppliers; when that kind of standardization happens, the local terms have tough going to hold their own.

Similarly, when the DARE field workers asked the questions about foreign foods and foods that others would not know (the same questions as those that elicited lutefisk), the responses made a great map for enchilada, as you can see on your handout. There are scattered responses outside the Southwest, but this is definitely a nicely regional map. Today, of course, “everyone” knows enchiladas, and the change can easily be traced to the rapid rise in fast food chains that have had nationwide distribution.

So if examples like these were the norm, it would not be unreasonable for people to think that our language is becoming homogenized and that dialects are quickly on their way out.

But what of all the other words we use in our day-to-day interactions with our families, friends, and others in our communities? These are not the kinds of words that are affected by our exposure to television or the internet. What do we call our grandparents? Are they grandma and grandpa? Granny and grampy? Nana and poppa? Memaw and papaw? Murmur and Murfar? Oma and opa? Or, like Barack Obama, do we call our grandmother Toot, short for the Hawaiian term tutu?
What do children say if they are going to play hooky? Do they bag school, as kids used to do in Pennsylvania and New Jersey? Bum school as in Michigan and Illinois? Ditch as in California? Hook school as in Maryland? Lay out of school, as in the Southeast? Or slough (pronounced “sluff”) as in Utah?

If they play a children’s game involving sitting in a circle and having someone go around the outside tapping players lightly on the head, is it duck, duck, goose? In most of the Inland North it certainly is. But if you’re from Minnesota, you’ll insist to the death that the right name for the game is not duck, duck goose but duck, duck, gray duck.

If a guest spends the night and there’s no spare bedroom, in the South you’ll put a pallet (or a Baptist pallet or a Methodist pallet) on the floor, but in the Northeast you’re likely to call it a shakedown. And when your children spend the night with friends, they could go to a slumber party, but they might instead call it a sleep-over.

These are the kinds of words that we use casually and un-self-consciously, and that we usually assume are used by “everyone else.”

So the notion of the continued existence of local dialects in America is not that when we travel to other parts of the country we won’t understand one another; in most cases we communicate very clearly. But we are often surprised and delighted to discover that differences permeate the language of our everyday conversations.

To give you some other examples, let me call on my own experience in moving around the United States. I moved to Wisconsin in 1975 after having lived in Ohio, California, Idaho, Georgia, Oregon, and Maine. In all those parts of the country, I had been aware of various differences from my northern California dialect (many more, of course, in Georgia and in Maine than in the Western states). But somehow, I naively thought that those experiences would have prepared me for moving to Wisconsin. After all, the Midwest is “General American,” right? I soon found that I was mistaken.

Shortly after I arrived in Madison, I saw a big sign out in front of the student union that said, “Brats on the Terrace.” Why, I wondered, would they be advertising the presence of unruly little children on the Terrace? And what was the terrace? My colleagues could not believe that I didn’t know what a brat was, and that I thought it rhymed with rat rather than with rot. I soon learned that brats were not just pork sausages, but that in Wisconsin they could also be pork and beef, chicken and apple, turkey and spinach, even tofu and curry. And some places have so many varieties, they even advertise the “brat of the week.”

I also learned that the terrace, in one sense, anyway, was the lovely large patio area at the edge of beautiful Lake Mendota. But the terrace was also the strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street—something for which I didn’t have a name at all, since there wasn’t such a thing in the community where I grew up. But through DARE I discovered that there are dozens of very nicely regional terms throughout the country for that item, from boulevard, to grass plot, to median, neutral ground, no-man’s land, parking, parking strip, parkway, tree bank, tree belt, tree lawn, swale, and verge, to name the most common.

Not long after my introduction to brats, a colleague said she was going out to get some bakery and asked if I would like some; that was initially a puzzle, because to me, the bakery was where you bought sweet things, it wasn’t the pastries themselves. Other Wisconsin terms that were new to me were stop and goes (for traffic lights); squeaky cheese (for cheese curds—and I have to admit that I didn’t even know what cheese curds
were); *Spanish hamburger* for a sloppy joe; *flowage* (for a lake created by damming a river or stream); *budge* in the sense ‘to cut in line’ or ‘butt in line’; *bealer* for a mischievous child or an unruly person; the tradition of the *golden birthday*; and there were also names like *cuyoo, five hundred, sheephead* (or *schafrskopf*) and *skat* for various card games that are extremely popular and played in taverns throughout Wisconsin; and of course there was the stereotypic question, “Where’s the nearest bubbler?” (In southeastern Wisconsin, *bubblers* are drinking fountains. And it turns out that the isogloss for the use of *bubbler* in southeastern Wisconsin matches very closely the marketing area of the Kohler Company, a manufacturer of plumbing fixtures, in about 1918.)

I also found when I moved to Wisconsin that it wasn’t only the lexicon that could be puzzling; sometimes little grammatical constructions intruded as well. I was taken aback when our office manager asked if I would “pass her a paperclip once.” Only once? I would have been happy to do it three or four times! (This vaguely emphatic use of *once* is probably a calque of German *einzal* in Wisconsin, but there are also similar uses in English dialects.) Later, after I had borrowed her stapler and she had seen me use it, she asked, “Are you using the stapler yet?” It took me a minute to realize that she was using “yet” where I would use “still.” Similarly, the question, “Could you borrow me five dollars?” was a bit of a surprise, as were sentences such as “Meet me up against Walgreens” and “Let’s go by John’s for dinner” (when the plan is to stop and eat, not just drive by John’s house). All of these reflect the very strong German heritage of Wisconsin, particularly in the southeastern part of the state.

There are also tag questions modeled on German *nicht wahr*, in various forms, such as, “That was a good movie, ainna?” (stereotypical of Milwaukee); or “You’re a college graduate now, ain’t?” (found in Pennsylvania German as well as other German settlement areas); or, among children, “Johnny hit me first, inso, inso?” which is characteristic of the Fox River Valley area of Wisconsin.

And then there’s the very common question, “I’m going to the store. Want to come with?” This is characteristic not just of German-heritage areas in Wisconsin, where people would be familiar with the German *mitgehen*, but also throughout the Upper Midwest in places where there have been large numbers of Dutch, Danish, Frisian, Norwegian, Swedish, or Yiddish speakers as well.

And where those speakers of other languages settled, they left many traces of their native cultures. It’s not only *lutefisk* that characterizes the ethnic lexicon of Wisconsin and the Upper Midwest; we’re blessed with delicacies such as *booya, czarnina, kielbasa, kolacky, kringle, krumkake, lefse, limpa, paczki, pierogi, rommegrot, sandbakkels, suelze*, and *trippe*, among food items, and *julebukking, the kermisss* and *kilby* among ethnic traditions.

Then there’s the Norwegian way of expressing distaste, as in, “Ooooh, that’s *ishy!***” (rather than *icky*). Or the Finnish word *sisu*, used in northern Wisconsin to mean ‘perseverance’ or ‘determination.’ And of course, there’s that wonderfully expressive Norwegian phrase, “*Uff da!*” an all-purpose exclamation that can evoke anything from surprise, to aversion, to disgust, or to pain.

I suspect that Christopher Caldwell would be surprised to discover just how much of the everyday vocabulary of people in the Midwest (and other regions as well) he was unfamiliar with. But they aren’t the kinds of words he would hear on the television in the
airport in Minneapolis (or in Denver, Austin, Atlanta, or Baltimore). They are the kinds of words he would hear only if he left the airport, came into town, and stopped long enough to meet the family, share a meal, and become a friend. And these words are not going to disappear just because a journalist from the Northeast has never heard of them.

But enough of Caldwell. I think this is good evidence to suggest that the differences that still exist from one dialect to another, as well as the words that formerly existed in one place or another, justify the exercise of collecting and recording them. But if the scholarly effort were not justifiable in and of itself, there would still be some very tangible and practical uses for this project that might convince even the most skeptical of our critics. So, “Who Needs DARE?”

In talking about the people who use DARE, I like to start first with librarians, because they are the people we assumed from the beginning would purchase this reference and use it in their work. And we know that they have used it when we get letters such as this one, from a librarian in Tennessee:

“DARE . . . has come to my rescue on numerous occasions when I had no idea that an expression or word was regional.

A good example: a library patron wanted information on dry-land fish. We looked in every “fish” book we could think of, to no avail. As the patron kept repeating that this fish “grew in the woods,” and as I could not imagine any type of fish that would “grow in the woods,” I finally got to wondering if this was a regional expression. And of course it was: a dry-land fish is an edible mushroom.”

It was not surprising that this letter came from Tennessee, for 15 of our 16 examples of the phrase came either from Kentucky or Tennessee (the other was from north Georgia). The term seems to be applied particularly to morels, which have a reputation for being rather fragrant as they decay. As one of our Informants put it, “they smells bad like a feesh when they’s rotten.”

But librarians are expectable users of a reference tool like DARE. An unanticipated use was described by Roger Shuy, a Georgetown University professor who became a forensic linguist after retirement. While he was at Georgetown, he had a student who was working for the FBI. I quote from Roger’s letter:

“[This student] got me involved in the Unibomber case and I analyzed all of the Unibomber’s threat letters, then his manifesto (before it was made public). Using language clues of region, age, race, gender, education level, religious background, and social status, I produced a linguistic profile that differed considerably from the one that their profilers had made. I found him to be from the Chicago area (but who lived for some part of his life in northern California), well educated (as I put it, probably with a doctorate, but not in the humanities or social sciences), about 50 years old, male, white (or well educated black), and some religious background that is probably no longer practiced. The FBI profile had him as from the coast, young, male, white, relatively uneducated, and a tradesman. . .

I describe this work here to point out the value of DARE as a tool that I use in
doing this profiling. I suspect that it may not have occurred to anyone that law enforcement investigation is aided by reference tools such as DARE. I keep my three volumes of DARE very handy to my desk along with my unabridged dictionaries, dictionaries of slang, usage texts, regional dialect atlases, encyclopedias, and other important reference works. I find it invaluable. Needless to say, it would be even more valuable if it went beyond the letter O.”

Obviously, Roger’s letter was written before Volume IV was published, so by now he has all the letters up through Sk. And by March of next year, he’ll have everything through Z.

Roger has told us of other cases as well, in which he has been able to eliminate suspects from a police list or to narrow in on a criminal party by checking DARE for the distributions of words that turn up in threat letters and ransom notes. For instance, one pencil-scrawled ransom note, left at the doorstep of the parents of an abducted juvenile, said this:

“Do you ever want to see your precious little girl again?
Put $10,000 cash in a diaper bag.
Put it in the green trash kan on the devil strip at the corner of 18th and Carlson.
Don't bring anybody along. No kops!! Come alone!
I'll be watching you all the time. Anyone with you,
deal is off and dautter is dead!!!”

There are several interesting things about this note: One is that the writer spelled “trash can” as “kan,” “cops” as “kops,” and “daughter” as “dautter.” But he correctly spelled precious, he didn’t forget the a in diaper, and he spelled watching right; and, except for the exclamation points, the punctuation was standard. This suggested that the writer was faking his educational background and that a fairly educated person was “dumbing down” here.

But what really caught Roger’s eye was the sentence “Put it in the green trash kan on the devil strip.” The devil strip? Where could he find out about that? It wasn’t in Webster’s Third or any other standard American dictionary, it’s not in the OED, the Dictionary of Americanisms, or the Dictionary of American English. But it is in DARE. The devil strip is that strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street that I mentioned before that has so many regional names. And the citations show that it is used almost solely in northeastern Ohio, in the triangle outlined by Cleveland, Akron, and Youngstown. As it turned out, the list of suspects compiled by the police in this case included one well educated man from Akron; when he was confronted with these bits of linguistic evidence as well as the other evidence, he confessed to the kidnapping. We were delighted to hear about this use of DARE.

More recently, we’ve heard from computer scientists at the Illinois Institute of Technology that they are eager to use the electronic version of DARE in what they call “automatic authorship profiling”—the automated version of what Roger has done with the print volumes. Their hope is that the regional data in DARE can be combined with programs they have already developed to estimate age, gender, native language, and other characteristics to help identify authors of documents such as ransom notes, crime-related e-mails, etc.
In addition to forensic linguists, lawyers are also folks who need DARE. Questions that we receive from lawyers can range from the mundane to the amusing, but for the attorneys themselves, they are all, of course, important. One strange query came from a lawyer in Washington state who wanted to know whether we could document the term *mudflap* as an endearment.

Apparently his client had written about a former girlfriend, calling her a *mudflap*. The woman was not amused. He tried to deflect her anger by replying that it was intended as a compliment. We checked our own fieldwork and all the slang dictionaries we had, but came up empty. I wondered about it for a long time, though. It didn’t dawn on me what was probably going on until years later when I was driving behind a huge semi and happened to see the curvaceous female outlined on the mudflaps. Depending on one’s point of view, I suppose it could be an endearment!

On another occasion, I got a call from a New Hampshire Public Defender, who wanted to know whether we had evidence that people routinely say such things as, “I could kill him,” without ever intending to follow through with any violence. Of course we all know that people say things like that all the time. But DARE had hard evidence, in the form of responses to half a dozen or so questions in our questionnaire:

For instance, in response to the prompt, “He’s a whole week late. I’m going to ________,” we collected responses such as “bash his head in,” “beat his head in,” “blow him up,” “fan his ass,” “kill him,” and “murder him.”

And to the question about a person you think is worthless, “He isn’t worth ________,” we had lots of answers of the type “He isn’t worth the bullet it would take to shoot him,” “the powder and lead it would take to kill him (blow him up, blow his brains out),” “the rope it would take to hang him” and “the time it would take to bury him.”

To another question, “He’s run off with my hammer again, ______!?” we had such responses as, “I’ll kill him,” “I’ll shoot him,” and “I’ll wring his neck.”

And these were all in answer to some pretty mild provocations! None of these Informants, of course, had any intention of doing such a thing; the point is that the defendant in New Hampshire had uttered such a “threat,” and someone had turned up dead. The Public Defender had to show that the man was just saying what people say in such situations. Unfortunately, I didn’t ever hear the outcome of the case, but it’s conceivable that evidence of the sort we had collected could have been useful for a defense.

A more typical use of DARE by lawyers is simply to consult the Dictionary as any other reader would. A lawyer in Atlanta recently told of working with a mediator who used the term *dogfall settlement*. This was a totally unfamiliar phrase to him, so he had to do some quick research. Fortunately, the first four volumes of DARE have been scanned for Google Books (with about ten percent of the total being available to an individual reader), and our entry for *dogfall* was on one of the available pages. It is defined as a tie in a fight or a wrestling match. The lawyer wrote, “Looks like it is used primarily in Arkansas, Kentucky, etc., which is interesting because this mediator was from Louisville.”

So lawyers and law enforcement are wonderful examples of fields that we hadn’t predicted as benefitting from DARE, but which we are, of course, very pleased to be able to assist. Another group is physicians. Imagine for a moment what it would be like to
grow up, say, in New York, go to NYU for undergraduate work, and then attend NYU’s School of Medicine. And then, on Match Day, to find that your residency was to be in rural northern Maine? Southern Appalachia? Western New Mexico? What would you say to the patient who complained that he had been riffin’ and had jags in his leaders? Or had the ground itch? Or a case of dew poison? Or a healing? Or the salt rheum? Or pipjennies? Or kernels? Or pones? If you had DARE available, you could save yourself some embarrassment by excusing yourself, quickly looking those words up, and going back with the appropriate questions and suggestions.

DARE has also proved to be surprisingly important to the fields of psychiatry and geriatrics. Several years ago we received a phone call from a psychiatrist at the University of Chicago. He wanted to know what we could tell him about the terms false face, tom walkers, harp, and mouth organ. We could tell him that false face (for a face mask) was not too common in the US, but seemed to be found more often in the South than elsewhere. Tom walkers was an easier problem because one of the questions in the DARE Questionnaire had asked for names of “long wooden poles with a foot piece that children walk around on to make them tall.” While most people would call them stilts, we have a very nice map showing that tom walkers is the regional term found throughout the South and the South Midland. Similarly, harp and mouth organ are both regional terms for what most people probably call a ‘harmonica.’ Harp is found chiefly in the South and South Midland while mouth organ occurs primarily in the Inland North and North Midland.

The reason that the psychiatrist was asking about these terms is that there is a widely used diagnostic test to determine whether a person has aphasia (the inability to come up with appropriate words for things). The test consists of 60 full-page line-drawings of common items (a gate, a trellis, a spoon, a saw, an accordion, etc.) and asks people to name them. Unfortunately, however, the makers of the test seem to have been totally unaware of the kinds of regional and social variation that characterize American English. So, when patients respond to the pictures using the words they have grown up with, and those words happen not to be common where the test-makers live, the patients are marked “wrong” for using their legitimate regional words. To further complicate things, the test is set up with the presumed easier terms first, with the harder ones at the end. If a patient has trouble early on, the test is discontinued. So if the pictures for which you use your regional terms happen to appear in the early sections of the test, you are doubly penalized, because you’re marked wrong and then you’re tossed out of the game.

I looked at a copy of the test to see whether the three pictures the Chicago doctor had asked about were the only ones that were likely to present this kind of problem. Unfortunately, they were not. While a drawing of a pencil might seem unlikely to elicit any other names than pencil, a look at the responses to the DARE question about pens and pencils showed more variation than I would have guessed. For some respondents, the brand name had become generic, so that pencils were simply Eagles or Mongols, or, for a mechanical pencil, Eversharps; to a test administrator who wasn’t familiar with these brand names, “wrong” would be the only logical conclusion.

A picture of a mushroom might also seem to be hard to misidentify, but our data show that, in addition to dry-land fish, terms like cat stool, frog table, fairy table, fairy platform, and devil’s footstool are also heard, among many other regional and folk names for this plant.
And what would happen to a patient who responded with *tunnel* to a picture of a funnel? This sounds like phonological interference, doesn’t it? Only a test administrator who knew that *tunnel* is an old-fashioned, chiefly New England word for a funnel would give the patient the benefit of the doubt for that response.

The Chicago psychiatrist and his colleagues found that 13% of the tests they examined contained inaccuracies in scoring because regional terms were marked as incorrect. And he was judging them only on the basis of the three questions he had asked us about (for the pictures of the face mask, the stilts, and the harmonica). Had he known of the other possibilities for regional synonyms, the results would doubtless have been even more distressing. All of this is bad enough in terms of leading to a bad diagnosis. But it can be even more insidious.

I mentioned this situation to a friend who is a geriatric nurse, and she was truly appalled. She explained to me that if a person were diagnosed with aphasia or another brain abnormality as a result of this test, the normal procedure would be to start a course of language therapy. After a period of perhaps six weeks, the test would be administered again. And if patients had the temerity to continue to use their own regional words, they would *again* be marked “wrong.” The test results would show that the therapy was doing nothing to help. Patients receiving Medicare support for the treatments would find payments discontinued, because they had not demonstrated that they were “progressing.” (Medicare continues payments only if the patient can be said to be “progressing.”) So an inadequate test key can not only confound the initial diagnosis but also confound the recovery.

To get a feeling for how widely this diagnostic test is used, I did a quick internet search and discovered that it is indeed considered a standard neuropsychological test, and it is used not only all across the U.S. and Canada, but in Australia and New Zealand as well. (Imagine the additional complications in scoring the test for those varieties of English.) I also discovered that learning how to use this test is one of the specific requirements in the neuropsychology rotation for doctors in the U.S. Army. It’s hard to imagine a more diverse patient group than that in the Army, so the implications of relying on an inadequate answer key are extremely serious.

Fortunately, a few years ago at a conference, I learned that the original publisher of the test had recently sold it to a new publisher. I met the new person in charge of that book, and she assured me that the next time it is revised, she will make a point of working with me to expand the answer key to recognize regional variation. I will be extremely pleased to be able to remedy a problem that may well have disadvantaged many speakers of regional varieties over a period of close to forty years.

Those are some of the most dramatic examples of people who need *DARE*, but I can also point to the oral historian, who does indeed use *DARE* as Christopher Caldwell suggested, to understand the old-fashioned and archaic terms as well as the regional terms he comes across in oral histories. I point to the historian of science and agriculture, who needs to know about the terms used to describe old-fashioned tools, harnesses, wagons, derricks, etc. I mention the screen writer who needs to know about *rent parties* and discovers that *DARE* gives a much more complete picture than the *OED* can of the life of the expression *rent party* and the place of the rent party in African-American culture. I give a nod to the natural science researcher who needs to know that the bittern can also be called by more than fifty other names, including such wonderfully creative ones as
barrel-maker, belcher-squelcher, bog-pumper, bottle-kachunk, dunkadoo, Johnny Gongle, postdriver, slough-pumper, slugtoot, thunder pumper, and wollerkerto. And I point to the linguist who told me that most grammars say that the so-called “get passive” (as in “I got shot” rather than “I was shot”) is used with only a handful of verbs. She is a native German speaker, but had the feeling that Americans use the get-passive with many verbs. I invited her to look at DARE’s fieldwork data, and she found that the get-passive was used with more than seventy different verbs. And I take pleasure in mentioning the writer Tom Wolfe, who sent me an e-mail message saying, “DARE has become my favorite reading and has helped me in the Blue Ridge Mountains section of the novel I’m now working on [=I Am Charlotte Simmons (2004)].”

And finally, to show how mainstream DARE has become, I can report that a year or so ago on the television quiz show “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” the question for the $250,000 prize was, “According to the Dictionary of American Regional English, a “railroad daisy” is what kind of a flower?” (They gave four choices, including the right answer, a black-eyed Susan.)

So I hope you’ll agree with me that DARE is beloved not just by Caldwell’s “columnists and autodidacts,” but by scholars of many stripes and language lovers of any stripe. And those dialect words that are “melting away like butter on a stove?” Don’t count on it. One of the best places to find contemporary examples of regional terms is in chat groups and blogs on the Internet, where people unselfconsciously use the words they’ve grown up with.

If dialects are not disappearing but are continuing to change in many different ways, what’s next for DARE? Is it finished? Far from it! We are currently at work on a volume of supplemental materials that will make DARE even more useful.

This volume will include three parts: the first is a large section of contrastive maps, showing in one place the synonyms for a particular item or concept (very much like the maps for potluck on the back of your handout). Rather than having to look through the five text volumes to see maps for potluck, covered dish dinner, carry-in dinner, pitch-in, and tureen supper, you’ll have them laid out together so the contrastive distributions are easily recognized. These maps will be fascinating for general language lovers; and teachers whose libraries do not include the five DARE text volumes, or whose classrooms are not wired, can also use this book to demonstrate the wide variety of regional patterns in American English.

The second part is an Index to all the regional, usage, and etymological labels in the five volumes of text. What this means is that if you want to know what words are characteristic of, for instance, Texas, Connecticut, or the Pacific Northwest, you can look up that regional label and see the list of every entry that mentions that place in its regional label.

You can also look there to see what entries are labeled as being more common among old people, women or men, Black speakers, well or poorly educated speakers, or urban vs. rural people.

And for teachers, it means that if you’re talking about linguistic processes such as back-formation, folk-etymology, metathesis, or metanalysis, you can look up those terms and find examples as they occur in American English, rather than pulling standard but fusty examples from the OED; and it means that readers who want to know what words have come into American English from Spanish, Polish, Quechua, Swedish, or
Algonquin, can look up each term and find a list of such words.

The third part is the Data Summary, which is the record of all the responses gathered during the DARE fieldwork. So if you’re curious about how people responded to the question about dust balls under the bed, you can go to that question and see that DARE Informants had more than 170 different terms for it (including such nice terms as house moss, moots, and wooties in addition to the common dust bunnies and dust kitties); or you could discover that a heavy rain storm can be a bridge lifter, chunk floater, goose drownder, lightwood-knot floater, toad-strangler, or trash mover as well as a cloudburst, downpour, or gully washer. These lists will provide much amusement, but they are also tangible evidence of the continuing vitality of regional expressions, and for scholars, they provide ideas and materials for additional research.

The supplementary volume will appear early in 2013. At the same time we are working on that, we are also working on the specifications for a digital edition, which Harvard University Press plans to launch late in 2013. Once that is up and running, we will be able to expand and improve upon the existing entries, using the new and productive electronic resources that are available now. We will also start adding entirely new entries and begin the process of tracking the ongoing changes in American English. Although a few local terms may seem to “melt like butter on a stove,” variation in American dialects continues to thrive and to provide grist for the lexicographic mill.

REFERENCES


