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The Yankee Myth. Americans Defy Description. A Pretty Argument

I have been interviewed by reporters pretty well all over the world, and I have read the interviews afterward, but it was not until I came to Sydney and read the Sydney reporters' interviews with me that I was aware of how strangely I talked – or rather, was supposed to talk. Words and phrases were put into my mouth that I had never uttered, and as I read on and on I found that the reporters had made me over into a New England Yankee.

In short, I found that what I may call the Yankee Myth obtained in the minds of the Sydney reporters. Down East, or New England, Yankees have, not a dialect, but a system of colloquialisms all their own. It is quite remarkable, but not nearly so remarkable as the dialect spoken in Yorkshire or Cornwall, nor is it as divergent from the English language as those dialects are over others to be found in the British Isles. Now, I am confident that I do not talk like a Yankee. I was born and educated in California, some three thousand miles west of Yankee-land, and I talk like a Californian. Californians have no system of colloquialisms peculiarly their own. As other states contributed to the settlement of California, and, as a result, a Californian of today talks like – well, like an American. Whatever is peculiar about his speech is peculiar about the speech of all Americans, and is a peculiarity that will be found in every state in the United States. Thus, like all Americans, the Californian says, "I guess." (By the way, "I guess" is the flat equivalent of the English, "I fancy", and neither phrase is more peculiar than the other.)

"I reckon," on the other hand, is essentially a New England Yankee phrase. A Californian never uses it; nor does a Washingtonian, nor an Oregonian. It is used only in New England, and Australia, in which place it is very common on the lips of men. In fact, an Australian talks as much like a Yankee as a Californian does and a trifle more, especially in the pronunciation of many words that are pronounced otherwise in the dictionary. No Californian would be guilty of pronouncing "cow," "town," and "hole" for instance, like the Yankee pronounces them. The Australian, however, pronounces these words precisely as does the Yankee. All of which makes it more curious that the Sydney reporters should imagine that they hear a Californian talking like a Yankee.

How it has arisen I do not know, but the idea that all Americans talk like Yankees seems ineradicable in the Sydney reporter's mind. To one reporter I afterwards explained the difference between Californian speech and Yankee speech, and after that the said reporter interviewed me, and in the written interview had me talk precisely like a Yankee. It was not the reporter's fault. He meant all right. What if he did put into my mouth a score of words and phrases which I had never used in all my life? He thought I said them. I can quite believe that he remembered I said them when he came to writing the interview. And he remembered because of the Yankee Myth with which he was obsessed. I shied away from the next reporter that came along for fear he would ask me if I had any wooden nutmegs about me. Myths are hard things to down, you know.

One English writer, after traveling in Canada and Australia, traveled in the eastern part of the United States, and concluded that, except for the American intonation, he should have

thought himself in Victoria or New South Wales. He then traveled in the west and the south, and concluded that "there are as many different ways of speaking in various parts of the United States as there are in England. I sometimes thought myself in Yorkshire, sometimes among London cockneys, and sometimes among the best bred people." There was no Yankee Myth in his brain. When he came to judge how the people spoke as a whole, he was in despair. "I can," he said, "tell how they speak in any one of a dozen sections, but not how the American speaks."

Let me add that the Californian speaks as the American speaks. Less than two generations ago the settlement of California began, and the Americans who settled came from every state of the union. As a result, they sloughed their sectional speech-peculiarities, and the language that resulted was a composite, and today constitutes the real "American" English as it is spoken.

Anyway, it is a sign of provincialism to take notice of peculiarities of speech. I forestall criticism by pleading guilty to provincialism myself. I am an American, and America and Australia are both young countries, and young countries are always unusually provincial. Year by year, as universal education goes on and travel brings citizens of all countries in contact with one another, provincialism dies away. In the meantime let us laugh and be happy over the alien wight who says "elevator" for "lift" and "street-car" for "tram". We still do it in the United States, when any stray Englishman comes along and calls an "elevators" a "lift" or a "street-car" a "tram".

Years ago we were more provincial even than now as, for instance, a certain Englishman, who wrote, while living in a small French town in 1813 "these barbarians make fun of me everywhere just because I am properly dressed and speak the language of a human being. They chatter like apes and dress like Punch and Judy." Now, I wonder, judging from the foregoing, which of the two raves was more provincial. Anyway, let the Sydney reporter cheer up. In time they will outgrow the belief that all Americans speak like New England Yankees. But, if they don't hurry up and outgrow that belief, the only Yankee vernacular extant on the planet will be found in the columns of the Sydney newspapers. For the Yankee vernacular is dying out of New England. The present New England Yankees talk very little of it, and in the next generation it will have passed entirely away.

But in the meantime it is good to be provincial and laugh at one another's speech peculiarities. It is a mutual education. Laughter is a potent teacher. One may even correct a dog with laughter when all else fails. As for me, my visit to Australia will have done me good on at least one count. I have used "I guess" in the American way all my life and did not know it. I never thought about it until I came to Australia and was laughed at for using it. Then I began to analyze it. Now I am hopelessly self-conscious about it, and every time I say it the sound of it, echoing through my ears, cuts my brain like a knife. I shall break myself of it in time, but, depend upon it, I won't replace "I guess" with "I fancy."

The reporters of Melbourne are more advanced than those of Sydney. The Melbourne reporters are not burdened with any Yankee Myth. Why, in their interviews with me, I talk just plain, ordinary English. But the Tasmanian reporters are the most advanced of all. One of them has noted that there is no more Americanism about my speech than that of any Australian who has lived three or four years in the United States. This reporter also remarked a "painful Oxford pronunciation" of much that I spoke. I don't know what to make of this precisely, but "I guess" it is all right.

While we are about it, just one more word on the Americans. Foreign authorities to-day have just about reached the conclusion that they cannot define the American, that they do not

know who the American is. Let the experience of a German journalist be cited. He made four journeys to the United States. After the first trip he described the American as being "sharp-visaged, nervous, lank, and restless." After the second trip, having found so many Americans who were rotund and leisurely, he rearranged his description. By the end of the third trip he had lost confidence that he abandoned his description by external signs. He found himself driven to describe the Americans in terms of character. The American was "resourceful, inventive, and supreme in the pursuit of material ends." "My fourth trip", he said, "has knocked out the final attempt with the others. I have thrown them all over like a lot of rubbish. I now do not know what the American is, and I don't believe that anyone else does".

He still, however, had an idea that we were more in a hurry than other folk. But to show how unstable this lingering remnant of a definition was, along came Professor Munsterberg, another German writer, who stated in detail, and flatly, that "the American is never in a hurry." To cap this, Mr. H. W. Honwill, an English writer, found us conspicuous for our leisurely ways, and that we potter and dawdle as if life were a continuous holiday.

Well, anyway, I am all American, even if I can't be defined. But Sydney reporters take notice: I am not a New England Yankee; I am a Californian.