

HELP ! I CAN'T UNDERSTAND YOU !

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It is extremely depressing for a middle-aged school teacher to suddenly discover she lacks communicative competence in her own language. If this idea appeared to seep in on me before going off on summer vacation, it certainly palled on me during my trip to the Southern and Eastern U. S. A., my "tierra".

Several months before the purchase of my Greyhound Ameripass, I began to find it extremely difficult to read the ever-growing number of erudite articles in the various linguistic publications I subscribe to and therefore feel obliged to read. Elusive phrases like "the selection and comparison of reconstructed core vocabulary", and "the analysis of communicative behavior within a specified event" sent me crawling up a wall in the direction of my dictionary; but to no avail. I could find neither meaning nor sense. My fears of going completely mad were partially allayed by reading Mike Royko's "Educatoresé" where he states: "I have been struggling with a language known as educatoresé. It is spoken and written by educators to prevent those of us who aren't educators from knowing what they are up to".

A kindred spirit, Mike, but clearly not an educator, so how could I find complete solace in his well-documented article?

The second and even-greater blow to my intellect and speech habits was yet to come, upon contact with "the common man" in Florida. I was greeted by a veritable barrage of "poorly constructed" sentences. Any Course Four student of mine would have failed the course upon producing these grammatical concoctions which sprang so fluently and easily from the lips of my fellow Americans. I heard and fared no better in Georgia, the Carolinas, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey. Perhaps some respite would have come in New England but my vacation time and funds were limited, so off I went home, to Mexico City.

I have tried to set down some of the changes observed. It all adds up to a veritable revolution of linguistic patterns of Mr. & Mrs. Average, U.S.A. - a cross section of people in different walks of life.

- 1) The auxiliary Tense Markers seem to be disappearing:
 - "Where he off to?"
 - "Why he go there all the time?"
 - "She never write?"
 - "You plan to go?"
 - "You coming?"
 - "He here?"
- 2) No real rules can be given for the third person singular of verbs:
 - "He just do study and study."
 - "He don't ever get here on time."
 - "She eat right well."
- 3) The verb to be seems to be undergoing rather ghastly transformations:
 - "Is you all right?"
 - "They is all here."
 - "They ain't sick."
 - "You be back now."
- 4) The past tense has undergone dire changes too.
 - "I come here yesterday."
 - "He be gone by the time you leave the message."
 - "I done it all last night."
- 5) The -ly morpheme formerly found in adverbs of manner is going with the wind:
 - "She reads real slow."
 - "Drive careful."
 - "You better get there quick."
- 6) Double negatives flourish like spring weeds:
 - "He don't need no help from you."
 - "Nobody gives you nothing for free."

Those mentioned, together with the tremendous changes in the use of certain vocabulary items like grass, smoke, snow, fix, fuzz, can really "blow your mind" and give you the impression you are listening to an alien tongue. This can in turn, produce feelings of extreme insecurity in a teacher who is evaluating and correcting errors made by her Mexico City students. Does one really deduct for similar "errors" when the average U. S. speakers produce the same sentences with impunity every day? Questions like this have plagued me since my return. It is a problem and perhaps some re-thinking is in order. It would certainly be interesting to hear what the current "language trends" are in other parts of the U. S., in Canada and in England.

Between my growing fear of "Educatorese" where I flounder completely out of my depth and the shock of hearing so much "sub-standard" language in current use, I can only concur with Mike Royko:

"I don't understand these changes but I am very impressed anyway."