

Migration

Mountain Dialect: Reading Between the Spoken Lines



By Kathryn Walbert

Learning outcomes

Students will develop:

- respect for the cultural distinctiveness of North Carolina's various regions
- enhanced analytical skills that will enable them to approach new primary sources more critically
- and a heightened awareness of the challenges inherent in studying and understanding people who are different from one's self in some way.

Teacher planning

TIME REQUIRED FOR LESSON - 2 to 3 days

MATERIALS/RESOURCES

- Printed copies of Chapter 13 of *Our Southern Highlanders* by Horace Kephart.
- Printed copies of additional primary sources at the teacher's discretion.
- Teachers may also wish to create a worksheet to help students record details from their primary sources.

TECHNOLOGY RESOURCES

Internet access and computers for students to work singly or in groups of 3 to 4.

Pre-activities/SOCIAL STUDIES

Ideally, students should have studied the antebellum period, the turn of the twentieth century, and the Great Depression on at least a basic level. In that case, this activity could be used to enhance students' understanding of those three periods, draw comparisons, and look ahead toward possibly conducting

their own oral history interviews on a later topic such as World War II, segregation, the Civil Rights Movement or a more recent set of events.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS:

Students need to understand the idea of dialogue in literature, and will have been introduced to the concepts of simile, metaphor, and idiomatic expression.

Activities

"One day I handed a volume of John Fox's stories to a neighbor and asked him to read it, being curious to learn how those vivid pictures of mountain life would impress one who was born and bred in the same atmosphere. He scanned a few lines of the dialogue, then suddenly stared at me in amazement.

"What's the matter with it?" I asked, wondering what he could have found to startle him at the very beginning of a story.

"Why, that feller don't know hoes to spell!"

"Gravely I explained that dialect must be spelled as it is pronounced, so far as possible, or the life and savor of it would be lost.

But it was of no use. My friend was outraged. 'That tale-teller then is jest makin' fun of the mountain people by misspellin' our talk. You educated folks don't spell your own words the way you say them.' A most palpable hit; and it gave me a new point of view. To the mountaineers themselves their speech is natural and proper, of course, and when they see it bared to the spotlight, all eyes drawn toward it by an orthography that is as odd to them as it is to us, they are stirred to wrath."

Why was the mountaineer "stirred to wrath" to see his people's language treated in this way? Why did the transcribers write down mountain peoples spelling in this way? Do the transcribers just not know how to spell? Are they trying to make the mountain people look stupid? (If so, why?) Are they trying to capture the flavor of the spoken word?

1. Launch a discussion with students about whether it is easier or harder to understand someone from a culture different from their own.
2. Assign students to work on either slavery in North Carolina, the mountains at the turn of the twentieth century, or North Carolina and the Great Depression. Teachers could choose to just use one of these three topics, to do each topic in succession (either separately, with each set of resources explored during the week when the relevant topic is discussed in class, or together after all three topics have been covered as a way of reviewing, drawing connections, and bringing it all together), or to divide students into groups

and have various groups work on the topics independently (i.e. two or three groups of students might work on slavery, two or three on the mountains, and two or three on the Depression).

3. Ask students, in groups, to read selected portions of their chosen sources (slave narratives from North Carolina, a few selected paragraphs from the chapter from *Our Southern Highlands*, or WPA interviews from the Great Depression in North Carolina). Provide students with worksheets for taking notes on factual details they learn from the interviews, details that reveal the way of life at the time and place of the interview, and observations about the way people talk.

4. After students have read some of the language of the people who were interviewed, ask them what assumptions they might make about those people. Students may well comment that the people were either stupid or uneducated. Ask, "How do you know?" or "Give me an example."

5. Ask students, "What did you notice about people's language?" Write down their descriptive words on the blackboard. Then, read the following excerpt from *Our Southern Highlanders* to students:

6. At this point, ask students to pause and select three sentences from one of their sources that are written in dialect. Have them rewrite the sentences in "proper English." Ask volunteers to read their original sentences and the revised versions aloud. How are the two different? What impression does the original version give of the speaker in contrast to the revised "corrected" version? If the corrected version tends to make people sound smarter, why NOT always "fix" the grammar and spelling? What is "lost" when you don't try to capture the flavor of the spoken word?

7. What would happen if we took someone whose words are usually transcribed in proper English and transcribed them the way these people's words were transcribed? As an example, you could play an excerpt from one of these two inaugural addresses, repeatedly asking students to write down what the speaker says as they heard it — in other words, write down what the speakers — words sound like, not how they are supposed to be spelled (FDR and George W. Bush are chosen because they are both Presidents with regional accents and to provide some balance between North/South and Democrat/Republican). Ask students whether these transcriptions make the presidents look intelligent or not.

1. FDR's First Inaugural Address from *History Matters*

2. President Bush's Second Inaugural Address from National Public Radio

8. Compare the students' transcriptions of the first several sentences of the speeches with the written transcriptions and ask them how the two differ and what different impressions they would have of these two speakers if they read the two different versions.

9. Open up a discussion of the challenges of studying, interviewing, and writing about people who are different from one's self in terms of location, economic level, educational level, race, gender, or other traits. (One interesting exercise would be to ask students to think about things that they would tell their friends, but not a complete stranger. Then ask them to think about a complete stranger coming up to them and asking them questions — you know you will never see this person again and they are leaving your area probably never to return. Would you feel more free to talk to that person than, say, your best

friend or a parent? Why or why not? The idea here is to get students to see that there are things they would tell “insiders” that they would not tell an “outsider,” but there are also things they might feel free telling an “outsider” but not an “insider” because of fears that “inside” information would circulate through the “insider” group and get back to the wrong people.)

10. Ask students to brainstorm:

1. How can researchers study and write about people from groups other than their own with respect?
2. What do they need to think about?
3. How can they make sure they get the person’s story straight and tell it to others honestly and with dignity?
4. What role might the subjects of the research have in that process?

11. As a final project, students could interview someone they know about a historical event — perhaps one that is upcoming in their social studies curriculum — or, for an English Language Arts class, they could interview a family member about a favorite memory and turn that into a narrative story. Encourage students to write up their interview in two to three pages using at least ten direct quotations from the interviewee. They should decide whether to write up those quotations in dialect form, or in “proper” English. They should append a one-paragraph discussion to their paper explaining why they decided to write up the quotations in the way that they did — both what advantage they saw to doing it this way, and what they might possibly have lost by not taking the alternative route.

12. In a concluding discussion, students could talk about how people from different regions of the country or even different parts of North Carolina speak differently, using examples of pronunciations, regional phrases, and rhythms of speech that they hear every day. Ask students how these distinctive patterns of speech influence the way people are perceived, and whether they think everyone in the country should speak in the same way, or whether this distinctiveness is important and interesting. Do accents or particular ways of speaking get treated badly on television or in the media? What assumptions do people make when they hear someone speak with an accent? How can we, as researchers and thoughtful human beings, avoid negative making incorrect assumptions about people based on the ways they speak?

Assessment

Assessment should take into account students’ work with their primary sources, their transcriptions, their own interviews, and their reflections on the ways in which dialect influences how people think about others.

Supplemental information/COMMENTS

Teachers could expand this project by talking about dialect and the assumptions that researchers might make about people based on their speech as they approach primary sources on various topics throughout the year. This could also be a good pre-activity to help students get ready for a lesson plan or unit in

which they conduct their own oral history interviews or work extensively with resources that include dialect.

Vocabulary

Culture-the beliefs, customs, arts, etc., of a particular society, group, place, or time.

Migration-to pass usually periodically from one region or climate to another for feeding or breeding.

Dialect-a particular form of a language that is peculiar to a specific region or social group.

Emigration-to leave one's place of residence or country to live elsewhere.

Immigration-to come into a country of which one is not a native for permanent residence.

Oral History-a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies.

North Carolina Essential Standards

SOCIAL STUDIES

Grade 8

- 8.H.1.1 Construct charts, graphs, and historical narratives to explain particular events or issues
- 8.H.1.2 Summarize the literal meaning of historical documents in order to establish context
- 8.H.1.3 Use primary and secondary sources to interpret various historical perspectives
- 8.H.1.4 Use historical inquiry to evaluate the validity of sources used to construct historical narratives
- 8.C.1.1 Explain how influences from Africa, Europe, and the Americas impacted North Carolina and the United States
- 8.C.1.2 Summarize the origin of beliefs, practices, and traditions that represent various groups within North Carolina and the United States
- 8.TT.1 Use technology and other resources for assigned tasks
- 8.RP.1 Apply a research process to complete project-based activities
- 8.G.1.1 Explain how location and place have presented opportunities and challenges for the movement of people, goods, and ideas in North Carolina and the United States
- 8.G.1.2 Understand the human and physical characteristics of regions in North Carolina and the United States