

A Dialectologist's Progress: A Moral Tale

Roger W. Shuy

Published in American Speech Vol 87, No. 2 Summer, 2012

What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning

The end is where we start from

T.S.Eliot's "Little Gidding"

Today it may be hard to realize that the linguist members of LSA, TESOL and ADS at one time were an integrated whole, when we define linguistics as many parts of one complete discipline. Papers at LSA meetings contained representatives of what today are rather separately run organizations with large chasms separating them. But in the mid twentieth century, linguists with different interests listened and learned from each other in the same rooms. Those were halcyon days indeed. In contrast, today's linguistics is fragmented into specializations that find it difficult to interact with each other or even get to know each other. The tale I'm about to tell is one person's life efforts to try to mend the separations that have beset our field as it grew in stature and knowledge.

The end is where I stand as I tell this tale, but the end owes everything to the beginning. As T.S. Eliot says, to know an end is to know a beginning. No matter, because in many ways the beginning and end are often indistinguishable. This is a tale of how one linguist started his professional career in linguistic geography and applied linguistics, how he met unexpected events along the way, how he kept his eyes open for ways of

exploring new things, how he tried to bring the separated fields together, how he experienced a number of setbacks and right-angle turns along the way, how he learned the virtues of teamwork, how he discovered his own life passion, and finally, about how things gradually all came together for him. It's a tale with six chapters, each building on the one preceding it, and, like all moral tales, it concludes with the lessons learned during the process.

Chapter 1: Exploring regional dialects

This tale begins when I was an undergrad, a time when I didn't have a clue about where I wanted to go in my life. I first took a crack at majoring in accounting, for as a teenager I had a job working in a warehouse. When I walked past the office I could see accountants sitting at desks wearing white shirts and ties. It didn't take long for me to give up on this silly idea and I randomly switched my major to art, largely because I had always liked to draw and naively I had dreamed about a career as a cartoonist. My clear lack of any noticeable talent in both accounting and art led me to still another random choice---an undergrad major in English.

I took my Masters degrees in English at Kent State University, while simultaneously building tires at Firestone in the evenings. At Kent State I developed some interest in the Medieval and Renaissance periods, and learned from Francis Bacon the lofty notion that all knowledge should be my province. The key word here is "interest," which, as I began to discover, is not the same thing as "excitement." Despite this, I decided to pursue a PhD in English at Ohio State University.

There the far too common malady of grad school malaise took over until I registered for a grad seminar in Middle English, taught a man named Bloomfield (I should be clear here that it was not Leonard Bloomfield, but rather Morton Bloomfield, a Medievalist). In that doctoral level seminar, the focus was of course on Medieval literature. But when I wrote my quite forgettable course paper comparing Gower's Tale of Florent with Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale, I stumbled headfirst into Middle English dialects, and noticed that I was really excited by this part of the course. I talked with Professor Bloomfield about this and he told me that if I was really excited about dialects, I should go study with the nation's leading dialectologist, Raven McDavid at Case Western Reserve U in Cleveland. So I did this immediately, even though it was only mid semester.

To this day I am deeply indebted to Professor Bloomfield, for caring enough about me to lose me as his student. As a matter of full disclosure, however, I should also point out that there was the strong possibility that he didn't really want me as his student and I chose to believe the better of the two possible reasons underlying his advice. To change universities meant that I essentially had to begin my PhD program all over again, almost from scratch. But this set back turned out to be worth it, for McDavid and I magically hit it off from our very first meeting in his characteristically ruffled office. Those of you who were privileged to know the late Raven McDavid will understand this immediately.

A new problem for me was that Case Western Reserve was a private university with high tuition and I was a young married man supporting my wife and baby. They offered me a fellowship, but I simply couldn't afford to take it. I opted to teach junior high school English instead, somehow again managing two full-time jobs at the same time.

McDavid eventually mentored my dissertation on the Northern/Midland Dialect Boundary in Illinois, for which I carried out 40 Linguistic Atlas interviews of older, rural, lifetime residents in the northern half of the state excluding Chicago, which McDavid assigned to my fellow student Lee Pederson. When I finished my dissertation, one of my new friends, Professor Albert Marckwardt at the U of Michigan, helped me revise and seriously shorten the 400 page dissertation to a length it probably should have been in the first place. It was then published as number 38 in the ADS monograph series. I blush to admit that for a short while ADS used it as an example to others who were preparing similar monographs.

I then thought my days of Atlas field interviewing were finished, but Raven had other ideas in mind. He arranged for me to get a grant to finish the Atlas interviews in all the rest of the central and southern Illinois' counties that still had not been researched. I tape recorded all 50 of my or so five to six hour interviews, using the best equipment available at the time, a clunky reel-to-reel Wollensak using 8 inch mylar tapes. As an aside, I've subsequently donated all of those taped interviews to Atlas headquarters at the U of Georgia.

My excitement about fieldwork didn't stop with Atlas research. Earlier, while working on my MA, I had worked full time at Firestone building tires on the night shift. The upside of this job was that later, after I learned about the joys of fieldwork from McDavid, I decided to apply what he taught me to my earlier tire worker experience. I went back to the factory and compiled a lexicon of tire building, which led to my first published paper in *American Speech*, "Tireworker Terms." The paper was rather mundane, but it was a start at least. I realized that a research potential exists in virtually all contexts of life, even at a tire factory. An added benefit of my time in the factory was that this job also had firmly established my positive attitude toward the working class and labor unions, a topic that I will come back to later. Looking back on this now, I can now see that I was moving away from my rather elitist interest in the ancient Medieval past to an excitement about the everyday language of the here and now.

During my time at Case Western Reserve McDavid introduced me to all the big names in dialectology, including Fred Cassidy, Nelson Francis, David Reed, Harold Allen, Einar Haugen, Albert Marchwardt, Hans Kurath, E. Bagby Atwood, and others. Friends of McDavid soon became friends of mine, thanks to Raven's unique mentorship. He was like that. I was very excited about dialect geography and it appeared to be my life focus. But in 1964 this excitement took me into a remarkably new direction.

Chapter 2: Exploring sociolinguistics

McDavid, always alert to new things, realized that computers were important to the future of linguistic geography, so he arranged for me to get

a post-doc award to attend the LSA summer institute in 1964 held at Indiana U. He sent me there to try to figure out a way to computerize the massive files of Atlas material that had accumulated over several decades. In retrospect I consider my efforts there a total failure, but I did the best I could with the clunky main frame computers of that period, and I eventually published a couple of very primitive and undistinguished articles on the topic. What I learned very clearly was that computerizing Atlas files was not a skill for which I had much ability or held any real interest. I gladly bequeathed all of my stumbling accomplishments to Bill Kretchmar, who is much wiser and accomplished than I was.

But my summer at Indiana U had a positive side as well because, more important for this tale, at this same summer institute I met Bill Labov, Charles Ferguson, John Gumperz, Dell Hymes, and other important scholars for the first time. I became very energized and excited to learn from Labov about how to study linguistic variation in an urban population of mixed races, ages, and social class. This went far beyond studying the older, rural, white farmers I'd been interviewing for the Atlas. I also learned from Gumperz about social stratification and cross-cultural influences on language, from Hymes about the ethnography of communication, and from Ferguson about the human kindness and ethics that every scholar should have.

This exploration was a career changer for me, for it led me to newer ideas from sociology, anthropology, and especially linguistics. About the latter, I should point out that the 1960s was the period when a linguistic revolution was brewing. The main, week-long guest lectures at the LSA institute in

1964 were given by Chomsky for the generativists, and Pike for the descriptivists. A sort of intellectual war was brewing right under my nose. It was a bit confusing, but that summer I tried to discover whatever was useful, true, and good about generative theory while at the same time preserving what I had found useful, true, and good about the descriptive theory. My efforts in this apparently angered some of my fellow descriptivists, who couldn't seem to understand that I was simply trying to learn whatever I could, which was what the LSA institutes were set up to do. I discovered that I was expected to take sides in the on-going battle. Needless to say, their reaction to my stance was very painful.

Despite this personal set back, I learned that my life passion was being narrowed and refined to seeking justice for VBE speakers, especially for school children. I was coming to understand that regional variation was not enough for me. I needed to study variation by age, gender, race, ethnicity, and social status, using the most viable tools available. This also was the time that a new term, sociolinguistics, was beginning to be heard, although Bill Labov preferred to call it realistic linguistics. It is always hard to disagree with Bill Labov and to this day I believe he was right.

After that LSA institute I went back to Michigan State, where I was then teaching, and received a government grant to design and carry out the Detroit Dialect Study, which I did in 1966-67. I hired my former undergrad students, Walt Wolfram, Ralph Fasold, and Ed Anderson as part of a team of twelve linguists who used an interview containing some of the Atlas questions long with some of Labov's newer New York City items. In all, our tape-recorded stratified sample of over 600 Detroit residents provided the

most complete sample of urban residents at that time. Even more important, it gave me my first taste of working as a team rather than alone.

In 1967 I was invited to direct a newly created sociolinguistics program at the Center for Applied Linguistics, where I continued my new-found joy of sociolinguistic teamwork with Wolfram, Fasold and the many Georgetown grad students I hired over the following years. That program soon became recognized as CAL's jewel and to me it looked more and more that it might be a good idea for me to move into a more administrative role. After John Lotz left as Director of CAL, I blush to admit that I was greatly disappointed by not being chosen to replace him, but I later came to realize that my not being promoted to Director was probably one of the best things that ever happened to me. I would have turned out to be a poor fit for the job anyway. I came to understand that there is a huge difference between doing work myself and managing the work done by others. Somehow I realized that administrative work would slow me down or stop the exciting personal career path that was now becoming clear to me.

Meanwhile, sociolinguists became a hot topic in linguistics, and In 1969 I left CAL and, with a large grant from the National Science Foundation, I moved to Georgetown to create the first sociolinguistics doctoral program as a new component of its existing linguistics department. For the second time I took Fasold and Wolfram along with me and hired C.J.Bailey and linguistic anthropologist Dave Smith. Later, as the program grew, we added Deborah Tannen, Deborah Schiffrin, Muriel Saville-Troiki, Heidi Hamilton and others.

The Sociolinguistics program flourished from the start, but since I'm more comfortable with exploration than with maintenance, I grew restless doing the same things over and over again. In the academic world, perceived personal progress is to move from Assistant Professor to Associate Professor to Full Professor, to Dean, to Provost, and maybe even to President. As the sociolinguistics program grew in popularity, I began to get offers of deanships at various universities. After carefully considering them, I concluded that my passion for justice through the study of language variation was far more important than any university administrative position might be. Perhaps influenced by my union backgrounds with the Teamsters and Rubber Workers unions, I didn't want to lose my focus and passion by working for a company instead. So I decided to stay at Georgetown, where my goals and passion were more able to develop.

Chapter 3. Exploring discourse analysis and pragmatics

As the field of linguistics continued to develop even further, I realized that language variation exists in more than phonology, lexicon, and syntax. This meant that I needed to hire new faculty, which led me to hire Deborah Tannen, Deborah Schiffrin, and others to teach in our sociolinguistics program, and I learned much from them. When I was sentenced to serve as linguistics department chair for a while, I hired additional faculty with more modern training in syntax and semantics, from whom I also learned a great deal, whether or not I agreed with them. I realized that the job of faculty includes learning from each other and that this is what teamwork ought to be.

Almost as soon as the sociolinguistics program started Bailey suggested that it would be good to hold special meetings of like-minded scholars to share our concerns about language variation. Fasold and I heartily agreed, so we founded NWAV at Georgetown in 1972 and held the meetings there for six years until we decided to let other universities share the experience. NWAV has continued ever since as a vital and exciting enterprise. I count this as one of our great successes.

By the mid 1970s Bernard Spolsky, Dick Tucker and I were concerned that the US was oddly missing from many countries represented in the International Association of Applied Linguistics. To remedy this, we decided to found the American Association of Applied Linguistics, with the idea of holding our meetings jointly with LSA so that there could be more cross-fertilization between theoretical and applied linguistics. This lofty idea of combining theory and applied linguistics at the same meeting had an unfortunately quick death three years later, when the new leadership of AAAL decided to move the organization away from LSA. This was another set back to me, for which I have continuing regret, because today theoretical and applied linguistics seem to exist almost separately, often even in different university departments. Chalk this idea up as a tentative failure on my part. But then something else happened to me that set off a new area of exploration.

Chapter 4. Exploring forensic linguistics

On a flight from Washington DC to Dallas in the summer of 1979 I sat in the crowded middle seat next to a man who appeared to be reading a sermon. I

asked him if he was a minister and he told me, no, he was a lawyer. After he explained his law case to me, he asked me what I did for a living. I told him that I went around the country tape recording people's speech. "Wow," he said, "my partner has a case involving tape-recorded evidence. Would you be willing to look at the tapes?" I thought a bit and then agreed. Something new sounded interesting.

A week later, I got a call from a famous criminal lawyer in Houston, Richard "Racehorse" Haynes, who sent me several tapes involving T. Cullen Davis, an millionaire oilman, who was accused of soliciting the murder of his wife. After I testified in that trial, my telephone kept ringing. Somehow the word got around in the legal arena that linguistic analysis could assist defense lawyers and prosecutors in their law cases.

I then began to apply all of the linguistic tools I had been gradually acquiring, including dialectology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, speech acts, pragmatics and the newer developments in syntax and semantics to court cases---the full tool kit.

I testified and consulted in a number of cases while still teaching at Georgetown and to help develop language and law as a new area of applied linguistics. Unbeknownst to me at that time, a similar development was going on in the 1970s in Europe, by Hannes Kniffka in Germany and by Peter French in England. In the 1980s Malcolm Coulthard also became active in this field. I personally hired some of my Georgetown grad students to help with my analysis in these cases, enabling me to use teamwork again.

As I did this work, I realized that my life goal and passion about justice had taken on a new and broader dimension.

There was a disappointing set back with this work as well. Some of my good friends didn't understand the absolutely necessary objectivity of this work, telling me that they couldn't understand why I would help defend criminals. Of course, good forensic linguists stay totally aloof from advocacy in the cases they work on, because that's the sole job of the lawyers, not the experts. This fact remains hard to explain to people who don't understand this. As my colleague, Rob Leonard, put it: "Would DNA scientists withhold their conclusions because they might help defend a criminal?"

Chapter 5. Exploring retirement

In 1996 I turned 65 and after 40 years in the classroom, I decided to retire from Georgetown. For various reasons, I moved to Montana, thinking that I'd take up oil painting again, do some fishing, and enjoy the beautiful mountain scenery. This plan led to still another set back---I have been a complete failure at this concept of retirement.

Because I began to miss classroom interaction and the joys of teamwork, I decided that I could keep on teaching by writing books about my many exciting experiences while working in the area of language and law. After my alleged retirement I have written 10 books, about language and law. And I still consult on law cases and try to teach other forensic linguists and students individually, but no longer in the classroom. This is pretty

satisfying, but I still missed the joys of working as a team, but this discomfort lasted for only for a short while.

Chapter 6. Re-exploring teamwork

My next opportunity to be a part of a team again came in 2006, when Geoff Pullum and Mark Liberman invited me to join their group of 20 or so bloggers on Language Log. Okay, this was virtual teamwork, but it felt very good and I actively wrote for it until very recently, thanks mostly to Ben Zimmer, who guided me through the complex process of electronic posting.

At about this same time it became clear to me that the physical and emotional rigors of courtroom testifying were too much for me, so I created a new team of forensic linguists who now share the load with me and do most of the heavy lifting. Four of us linguists team together and I remain free from the conventional notion of retirement, while I can continue to pursue my passion for justice. I've now slowed down a bit, but not retired in the usual sense of that word.

So here I am in January 2012, an octogenarian who has learned a lot of life lessons. I now want to summarize the lessons I learned from this personal moral tale. Here are five of them:

Lesson 1. Find your passion.

I've focused on the cumulative explorations in my own career (from Medieval literature to regional dialects to sociolinguistics to language and law). I've stressed that this was an add-on process, not a replacement

process. This point is important, because the prudent person will learn what is good about the new and not throw away whatever is good about the old.

Most important of all, I've focused on having a passion for justice which would ensure that language evidence in both criminal and civil court cases be analyzed scientifically and fairly. It took me a while to find my passion, but it became clear to me that it would focus on the area of justice. I didn't choose to adjust my passion away from justice for disadvantaged children to legal justice (which is all that different anyway), but when the opportunity came to me, I took it, risk taker that I am. When I phased out my work with VBE and school children, other scholars were available to take up that work, and they are doing it much better than I did anyway.

Moral lesson: Find and identify your greatest passion and excitement in life. Keep your eyes open to new and sometimes surprising opportunities and don't be afraid to explore what can be good about them.

Lesson 2. Learn to survive adversity and setbacks

One of the great tests for those of us who went through the Chomskyan revolution was how to survive when our life's training and work was suddenly considered by many to be trivial and uninteresting. The Chomskyan revolution discouraged many descriptivists. Some quit. Some converted. Some learned to take whatever is useful from both. I've always liked what Charles Fillmore said about the conflict between what he called "armchair" linguistics and conventional descriptive or corpus linguistics:

Armchair linguistics does not have a good name in some linguistics circles...

Corpus linguistics does not have a good name in some linguistics circles...

These two don't speak to each other very often, but when they do, the corpus linguist says to the armchair linguist, "Why should I think that what you tell me is true?", and the armchair linguist says to the corpus linguist, "Why should I think that what you tell me is interesting?"

I am an armchair linguist who refuses to give up his old ways but who finds profit in being a consumer of some of the resources that corpus linguists have created.

I have two main observations to make. The first is that I don't think there can be any corpora, however large, that contain information about all of the areas of English lexicon and grammar that I want to explore [...] The second observation is that every corpus that I've had a chance to examine, however, small, has taught me facts that I couldn't imagine finding out about in any other way.

Indeed, find whatever is useful in both. We have to keep an open mind to the new ideas that come along. Starting with Medieval English literature, I had to be alert to the unplanned surprises that opened new doors for me. First it was the intensive training and practice of regional dialectology. After that, areas were opened to me about which I had never taken a single course:

sociolinguistics, newer ideas about syntax, pragmatics, speech acts and semantics, and finally the intersection of language and law. We have to keep on learning.

Moral lesson: Keep your mind open to new information, theories and ideas--- but hang onto the best of the old ones.

Lesson 3. Not all disappointments and setbacks impede your progress

I've also pointed out the disappointments and setbacks I've experienced along the way. Some of the things that we may dearly but wrongly desire teach us that we need to endure to get through them, keep our eyes open, and simply move on to something better. More often than not we suffer disappointments and setbacks about things that would not have been very good for us anyway.

Moral lesson: Keep exploring new things. As Fillmore so aptly pointed out, take advantage of what is good in the new but keep what is good in the old.

Lesson 4. Honor the scholars whose shoulders you stand upon.

I've talked about the right-angle turns that happen in people's lives. It may look like we're going in one direction and suddenly, something happens to change things. These right-angle turns are often created by caring and perceptive people. In my case, Morton Bloomfield got me started by having sympathy on me, a mediocre student of English literature, and suggesting

that I might like dialectology better. To him I am deeply grateful, for very few grad professors ever care enough about their students to try to guide their paths. Bloomfield was a great model.

My right-angle turn to dialectology was engineered and directed primarily, however, by Raven McDavid, to whom I owe my excitement about language variability, the joys of doing fieldwork, my concern for minorities, and my entire academic career. McDavid was another wonderful model.

I also am very indebted to Bill Labov for directing me to sociolinguistics and engineering another major right-angle turn in my career, which taught me how to figure out ways to realize my concern for minorities. Labov continues to be a great model for all of us.

And I certainly have to thank that lawyer who sat next to me on that airplane back in 1979 for opening to me the new door of forensic linguistics, which provided was a marvelous opportunity to expand my growing passion for justice to include people who face serious problems in the legal system.

There are many other scholars whose work taught me many important things. Naming them all would create a long list, but I will say that I have managed to write thank-you notes to many of them before they died. Not surprisingly, many wrote back to me, thanking me for remembering them. I hope this can be a model too.

Moral lesson: Be sure to give lots of credit and thanks to the people who got you where you are. Personally thank them before it's too late and they're no longer around. Don't limit this to your own

professors; also think about those who wrote books and articles that molded your life.

Lesson 5. Find the joys of working as a team with others

I've stressed the joys and effectiveness of working with teams of scholars rather than slogging it out alone in our dreary offices. We learn mostly from each other. This is possible, even when you're retired.

Moral lesson: Find people to work with. In grad school we were trained to be solitary scholars. That may be fine for course papers and dissertations, but it's simply impractical in a world that is exploding with so much new information. There was a time when we could keep up with our specialties. That's not true today. We need to work together as a team.

After all these years my tool kit still contains my earliest excitement for dialectology, which now marches along with sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, pragmatics, speech acts and whatever I find useful from both descriptive and armchair linguistics as tools that I now use in my work. But my roots in dialectology are still active in the law evidence I analyze. For example, here are some expressions I heard in a recent bribery case in Alabama:

- I'm on it like a June bug on a turd
- She's jumpy as a whore in church
- You better mash the lights now

- Now we're down to the lick-log
- I'll stay with him like white on rice
- Quit your damn fillafartin' around
- We'll need to run that trap soon
- I wouldn't trust that s.o.b. in a shithouse with a muzzle on
- That man stayed with me when my ox got stuck in the ditch
- They've got him by the short and girlies now
- She's just trying to push the goat
- I've got all that I can say grace over

My sincere wish is that you all have the opportunity to find and value your own passion when, like me, you're "down to the lick log" in your own academic journey of language variation. And if you haven't done so yet, I'd suggest that you "get on it like a June bug on a turd" and then "stay on it like white on rice."

We all need to keep exploring, discovering what excites us, finding and our passion, honoring those who paved our way, seeking justice, working as a team, and learning from the setbacks that seem to block our paths.

I began by quoting from T.S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding," one of his *Four Quartets*. I now conclude with a few more lines from the same poem:

We shall not cease from exploration

*And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*