Law Family Linguistic Study

Jeanne Law Bohannon, Kennesaw State University

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One Man’s Word: Tracing the Linguistic History of the Law Family Through Pronunciation
Jeanne Law Bohannon
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Background

Ever since I was a young child, I was regaled with stories of my long-dead ancestors told by my father, William, especially the life of his grandfather, also named William. It has always interested me more, because my father’s primary interest in and knowledge of our family’s descent comes from an oral tradition that began for him as a child as well. In fact, the basis of this linguistic study follows the dialectal tradition of the Law family through the voices of three William’s, beginning with my great-great-great grandfather in the 19th century Southern Appalachians.

I know my paternal great-grandfather only as a memory. He died when I was but six years old. At 85 years of age, he was “sharp as a tack” (Law, 2008). Having had a mild stroke, he was hospitalized on bed rest, as was the medical protocol of the early 1970s. This practice proved to be his death knell, however, as he succumbed to pneumonia a few weeks later. Flash-forward thirty years, and I am interviewing my father for a linguistic autobiography. Among other interesting anthropological facts and legends I gleaned from him, which here shall go temporarily untold, was a pronunciation artifact of my great grandfather’s dialect that came up in our conversation only as a miscellaneous observation and reminiscence. Upon researching it, though, we found this feature to be pivotal in examining our genealogical linguistic roots. To fully understand the import of this pronunciation feature substituting the word “holp” for “help,” we must immerse ourselves briefly deeper into our familial narrative.

Dialectal Pronunciation Feature

My family traces its modern roots to Cobb County in Northwest Metro Atlanta. My father William likes to crow to non-native friends of his firm, indigenous origins in this part of Georgia. Whenever we discuss (monologue) genealogy, William delights in re-telling tales of his own upbringing in Marietta, the county seat for Cobb. As the second child of seven and born during World War II, William spent much of his little free time riding his bicycle to his grandparent’s house. As his grandpa’s namesake, William was a favorite. I believe he also endeared himself to the old man through a penchant for history and his love of storytelling. My father credits his Grandpa William with giving him the “history bug” (Law 2008). My father William spent most of his free days with his grandpa, walking the streets of Marietta and rocking on the porch. It was here, in a small mill house off the square of a small Southern town, that my father picked up the linguistic feature that has compelled me to develop this study. My father clearly remembers that my great-grandfather never “helped” anyone – he “holped” them. Without any knowledge of this pronunciation feature’s significance, my dad said to me: “Grandpa didn’t say ‘can I help you.’ Instead, he said ‘can I holp ya” (Law 2008). We will leave the last vowel deletion and focus in this study on the substitution of “holp” for “help.” Also important to this study is that great-grandpa William repeatedly taught my father that our family is related to the McLarens of Balquidder, in Central Scotland and that we came to Georgia through way of the Southern Appalachians. This oral historical account came to him from his own grandfather, or my great, great, great grandfather. Armed with this oral tradition, combined with the official family genealogy written by my father and aunt in 1995, I set off on a journey to discover what connection, if any, existed within the tales.
Scholarship on “Holg”

I began my research in a likely place: the foothills of South Carolina, which contains the eastern language population of the Southern Appalachians. Michael Montgomery from the University of South Carolina has published scholarship on the Scotch-Irish connections to southern American dialect. In his paper, *The Scotch-Irish Element in Appalachian English: How Broad? How Deep?*, he examines the relationship between Received dialect (formal British English), Ulster-Scot dialect, and particular holdovers to these dialects in the communities of Southern Appalachia. I should note here, that while I found much research worthy of debate on the anthropological origins of Appalachian culture, I found scant scholarship that argued against the British phonological roots of its language. Then I came upon the Montgomery paper, which stands in stark contrast to most scholarship that traces Appalachian language roots to Elizabethan English. In fact, Montgomery finds that the word “holf” consistently substituted for “help” within speakers of varying generation and social caste in Appalachia displays characteristics of Ulster-Scot dialect from Central Scotland. Therefore, the case becomes more complicated:

Few, if any, of those writing on Appalachian speech have apparently known that there is not one, but two multi-volume historical dictionaries of Scots, the *Scottish National Dictionary* and the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*. Questions about Scotch-Irish influence cannot be addressed by using the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the best-known and most comprehensive historical dictionary of the language, because its coverage of non-literary and regional varieties, particularly from Ireland, is quite limited. Like all dictionaries, it is only as good and complete as its citation files, and these were heavily biased toward literary language and offer little direct evidence on the speech patterns of the common people. Also, they suffer from the problem of negative evidence; that is, the entry of a word in a dictionary indicates something about when, where, and how that word has been used, but we cannot necessarily conclude from the absence of a word that it did not exist, or from the absence of a citation that a word was not used at a certain time and place. Even the best dictionaries fall considerably short of being based on a complete documentary record. Thus, it is necessary to go beyond dictionaries and consult other types of material—local 13 glossaries, linguistic studies, and original sources themselves. An extensive literature on Scots does exist, though it is largely tucked away in major British libraries and there is as yet no good bibliography for it. The literature on the English language of Ulster is also largely inaccessible to Americans, and some of the larger studies and sources of data are unpublished. (Montgomery, N.D.).

By using these older sources for language and dialectal information, I believe that we can come closer to an understanding as to how the Ulster Scot dialect influenced immigrants to the Southern U.S. Here, there might be direct evidence to support the oral tradition.

Looking further, Charles Jones (1997), in his book, *Edinburgh History of the Scots Language*, acknowledges differing linguistic opinions about whether Ulster Scot is a dialect of English or a language of its own, the debate of which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Jones asserts an important fact: that there are more than 100,000 Ulster Scot speakers today in Central and West Scotland ranging worldwide. With this number in mind, I probed further into historical documents that might add credibility to the Law Family oral tradition.

In his article "The Dialect of Ulster: Glossary of Words in the Ulster Dialect, Chiefly Used in the Midland and North-eastern Counties," published in the *Ulster Journal of*
Archeology, John Marshall (1904) lists words and pronunciation in Ulster Scot. His account of the word “holp” as a substitute for “help” is contained in all of the communities he surveyed. Therefore, it would seem to be a common pronunciation feature of Ulster Scot. He further asserts the spread of Ulster Scot to the New World with 17th and 18th century American colonization. My father imparted vital information he knew about this history as well. A series of immigration events that brought Scots-Irish to the Southern United States, specifically to the areas of West Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Georgia led families, including mine, to populate these areas over a course of time that lasted a few hundred years. This history is still with us, as my father explains: “the Scotch-Irish came to the South and stayed in the South. The largest gatherings of Scottish Highland families occur in the South. In fact the gathering that occurs at Stone Mountain, Georgia, is the largest in the world—even larger than similar events held each year in Scotland” (Law 2008). By combining both the oral history and actual documents to prove immigration, I found that the linguistic autobiography described in my study is supported and validated.

Because spoken dialect and pronunciation change continually, even within generations and isolated communities, it is difficult to find and trace oral traditions of language. Through my father’s testimony of Grandpa William’s specific pronunciation feature “holp,” I found a vital clue. Also through the tale telling, I learned of anecdotal evidence that was proven through reliable scholarship. As I presented my evolving findings to my father, he shared with me a National Public Radio archive broadcast that enlightened my study. Several leading evolutionary linguists discovered in 2007 that irregular verbs evolved to meet the demands of modern English. The researchers postulated that “patterns of change depended on how often the irregular verbs were used. Infrequently used irregular verbs were quickest to evolve. For instance, ‘holp,’ the past tense of ‘help,’ became the modern ‘helped’” (Siegel, 2007). When Grandpa William used “holp” as both a noun and a verb, he harkened back to historical language or memories of an older oral tradition.

So, then, here is one example of a Cobb County native that connects his linguistic heritage to Scotland, by way of Southern Appalachia. Oral tradition has proven in this instance to be a reliable source to support written documentation and research.

Changing Attitudes

This study and its ensuing interviews with my father have given me new respect for the wisdom of oral tradition and a newfound desire to explore further validities in Southern Appalachian pronunciation features. Also, my attitude toward Cobb County native dialect has been altered as well. I find that I look at language connections with historical familial roots more closely in an effort to determine possible anthropological connections. In reality, we are all the products of connections, not just of language and history, but also of our family stories.

In the end, Grandpa William’s question, “Can I holp ya?” became my bellwether. Yes, William Robert Law, you did. You helped me understand the efficacy of historical dialect and its vitality to maintaining family oral histories when only a bit of written documentation exists. In short, you helped me understand why we sit and listen to the remarkable tales our parents and grandparents tell and how those tales interweave themselves into the fabric of our shared histories.
References


