Scotch-Irish Grammar

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For a variety of reasons it is easiest and most appropriate to examine patterns of grammar if one wants to see how much East Tennessee English is ultimately due to Scotch-Irish emigrants and how much is due to those who came from England. Old letters, even those written by the uneducated, reveal few clues about pronunciation and have few occurrences of vocabulary items like those discussed above, but they exhibit grammatical patterns far more regularly. By grammar is meant how words are combined, the use of suffixes, and parts of speech like pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, helping verbs, and some adverbs—words that stand for and relate words to one another. The distinction between vocabulary (nouns, adjectives, most verbs and adverbs) and grammar (other parts of speech, but also helping verbs and some adverbs) is not just a technical one made by linguists. It is important here because vocabulary can change, disappear, or spread over space much more rapidly than can grammar, which is more stable across generations and therefore easier to track historically. Even today, it is new vocabulary and terminology that can catch on around the country almost overnight.

To begin with, this writer examined linguistic studies, tape recordings, old documents, and other sources to compile 21 grammatical features that are common in or are confined to Southern Appalachia and traceable either to Ireland/Scotland or to Southern England. These are grouped and listed below, with examples and sometimes comments about their usage and historical derivation. Not all of them occur in the British Isles today, but they are possible to document, through the use of dictionaries, historical grammars, and other sources that enable us to tell if they were originally Scotch-Irish or not. Of the 21, 18 (86%) are Scotch-Irish in origin. Five of these involve verbs, four pronouns, three prepositions, three conjunctions, and three adverbs.

The following grammatical features are Scotch-Irish:

1) the combination of *used to* and *could*: "You *used to could* look from Grandpa's door to the graveyard and the church house where we attended church." This construction contrasts a practice or reality of the past with one today.

2) the combination of *might* and *could* and similar patterns (*may can, might would*, etc.): "You *might could* ask somebody along the road [for directions]"; "I *may can* get it out tomorrow." This type of construction expresses uncertainty or indirectness.

3) *done* as a helping verb or an adverb: "We *done* finished up the chores for you"; "By the time we got there, he was *done* dead"; "I *done* told that boy not to go near the river." This verb usually means "already" or "completely"; it is sometimes used, as in the third example, to emphasize that something was done and ought not need to be repeated.

4) the suffix -s on a plural verb (or *is*), but only if its subject is a plural noun (as in *people knows*). The suffix doesn't occur on a verb whose subject is a personal pronoun (*they know*). This rule for using the suffix (or *is*) only on verbs with certain subjects has been common in Scotland since the 14th century and in the British Isles has been limited to Scotland and Northern England, and by extension to Ulster. In all these areas it is very common today. While a construction like *People knows* may be judged as an "error" in subject-verb agreement in the schoolroom nowadays, it was formerly used by royalty and nobility and in high literature by the Scottish ancestors of many of us.

5) the combination of *need* and the past participle of a verb: "There were men and women living in the Sugarlands with talent and the ability to do most anything *needed done* in the community"; "That thing *needs washed*." Most Americans say *needs washing* or *needs to be washed*.

6) *you'uns* = "you" (plural): "I appreciate every one of *you'uns* here"; "*You'uns* make yourselves at home."

7) *y'all* = "you" (plural): "I hope that *y'all* are ready."

8) the combination of *all* with other pronouns and occasionally with nouns: "A number of people taught—I don't know *who all*"; "I don't know *where all* he sold it at"; "Old man *Lon and Will all, they all* went with him." These compound pronouns emphasize the inclusion of other things or individuals that are not specifically named.

9) *all the* = "the only": "In Sugarlands that's *all the* one I know anything about"; "It was *all the* way you could take anything up there"; "No, we didn't know nothin'—*all the* thing we knowed was what the teacher told us around the school."

10) *all the far* = "as far as": "That's *all the far* I want to go."

11) *till* = "to" (in expressions of time): "He said he'd be here about quarter *till* eight."

12) *wait on* = "wait for": "I was supposed to *wait on* this fellow at the forks of the creek where we heard the dogs barking."

13) *fernent/forenenst* = "opposite, next to": "I crawled down through the alders by the river till I got *fernent* the bear"; "It's over *forenenst* the wall."

14) *and* used to introduce an elliptical clause without a verb: "He would steal the hat off your head *and* you [would be] lookin' at him"; "He married them *and* them sitting there in the buggy."

15) *whenever* = "when, at the time that, as soon as" (for a single instance of something): "*Whenever* I heard about it, I signed up right away"; "What did they do with you *whenever* you killed that man?"; "They were real good religious people, I mean, *whenever* I'd know them"; "*Whenever* I was about eight years old, when I got old enough to know where I was at, I left."

16) *till* = "so that, to the point that": "She said that somebody was witching the milk *till* she couldn't churn [it]"; "If you get this would you drop me a card *till* I'll know you did get it"; "My mama had rheumatiz [and] she got *till* she couldn't walk."

17) *they* = "there" (to introduce a sentence): "*They* come a big rain and washed the old foot bridge into the hallway between the two barns"; "*They* was just enough of us to fill them three benches [in school]"; "*They*'s not many that go there anymore."

18) *anymore* = "nowadays" (in positive sentences): "Government jobs are about all they have *anymore*"; "*Anymore* they have a hard time protecting things like that." All speakers of American English use this word in negative sentences ("I don't play *anymore*") and in questions ("Does he play *anymore*?"), but only a minority do so in positive sentences like those cited.

We now come to those grammatical features in traditional East Tennessee speech that were brought by settlers from Southern England (who in many parts of Appalachia were probably as numerous as those of Scotch-Irish heritage, if not more so). There are only three of these, each of which involves a suffix or a prefix, one on verbs, one on pronouns, and one on nouns:

1) the prefix *a-* on verbs: *a*-runnin', *a*-comin'. This pattern is historically unknown in Scotland outside ballad style, while in southern parts of England it was a feature of folk speech for centuries. It is thus classified as a Southern British feature. The prefix is especially likely to be used on action verbs, as is illustrated by the following quotation: "But here's the Good Book *a*-talkin' tonight, *a*-talkin' louder than the wind *a*-roarin' out yonder an' the thunder *a*-poppin'."[38]

2) the suffix *-n* on possessive pronouns (*hern, hisn, theirn, yourn*, etc.:) "I thought *hern* was prettier than mine"; "I don't know just how he made *hisn*." These forms take the suffix by analogy with *mine* (*my/mine, her/hern*).

3) the suffix *-es* on words ending in *-st* and *-sp* (*nestes, postes, waspes*): "Then one day she was out hunting turkeys' *nestes*"; "Look over on the side of the mountains [and] you will see a little house on stilts or *postes*."

The comparison just presented reveals that the Scotch-Irish contribution to modern-day East Tennessee grammar is much more substantial (in terms of the number of features), broader (in terms of the diversity of features), and deeper (in terms of the level of structure) than the Southern British or English one is. Most of the Scotch-Irish patterns can still be found in Ulster or Scotland, indicating that, however different people in Ulster and East Tennessee might sound today, this is a misleading impression based on the tone of voice, rhythm, and other more superficial characteristics; how they structure their sentences is much more similar and more telling. The settlers of the Volunteer State maintained much of what Scotch-Irish emigrants brought from Ulster a generation or two earlier, and Tennesseans today continue to preserve it, although social and educational pressures in the 20th century eroded many features. While our comparison enables us to answer the question that forms the title of this paper, it does only this and leaves other questions unanswered. The most intriguing and perhaps most important of these is *why* the Scotch-Irish features were preserved. The relative conservativeness of Southern mountain culture, a quality which has sometimes been confused with geographical isolation, is a

factor external to the language that must be partially responsible for these retentions. Internal factors are probably at play as well (such as whether the form fills a useful niche, as the pronouns *you'uns* and *y'all* certainly do, or expresses a particular nuance of meaning not captured by forms brought by other dialects). But one can hardly do more than speculate about such matters (for instance, as functional as it might appear for speakers to have, a distinction between singular *you* and plural *you'uns/y'all*, it is a mystery why a similar distinction—between *thou/thee* and *ye/you*—disappeared in Shakespeare's day, though it is maintained in the conservative idiom of the King James Version).

In making our comparison, we have isolated only a handful of words and expressions from many times this number that can be found in everyday speech, so we must careful not to overstate our conclusion-that, after all, has proved time and again a fault of those claiming the "Elizabethan" ancestry of mountain speech. The methodology has limitations and caveats. For instance, among the grammatical features brought by emigrants from the British Isles in common are at least a dozen that are traditionally associated with Southern Appalachia. These include the phrase *liked to* "nearly" ("I *liked to* died"), several pronouns (e.g., *hisself* "himself," *theirself/theirselves* "themselves," *hit* "it"), nouns that are not marked with the plural suffix if preceded by a measure word (*five bushel, twenty mile*, etc.), the preposition *again/against* in the sense of "before, by the time that" ("She'll be back *again* five o'clock"), and the adverbs *right* "rather" ("It's *right* cold this morning") and *yonder* "over there" ("When the roll is called up *yonder*, I'll be there").

Still, we now have countable, measurable evidence from grammar and to some extent vocabulary to support an important conclusion: the Scotch-Irish contribution significantly outweighs that from Southern Britain and appears much more responsible for the distinctiveness of Appalachian English today. To the extent that Southern Appalachian and East Tennessee speech differ from most of the rest of the country, this is more than anything else attributable to the language brought by Scotch-Irish emigrants and spread through the rest of the population in settlement times.

Rather brief though it in many ways is, the survey of language in this essay enables us to come much closer to saying how "Elizabethan" Appalachian speech is or how "Scotch-Irish" it is. It is the latter more than the former. The idea that East Tennesseans and other Southern hill folk have spoken or still speak in a fashion similar to Shakespeare, the English bard from Stratford-on-Avon, is less true than that they maintain the language brought to American shores by Ulster farmers and artisans in the 18th century. It is another question whether the image of stern Ulster Calvinists as the progenitors of East Tennessee speakers is as remotely appealing, not to say as romantic, as the figure of the master of words who authored *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* or the charming Good Queen Bess, after whom the phrase "the Queen's English" was coined. Now that East Tennesseans can say with some assurance that their speech preserves considerably less of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Chaucer than often claimed, and far more of the faceless, and often nameless, commoner from the north of Ireland, East Tennesseans will have to decide what this says about them and their region. One thing for certain is that some of those early Tennesseans of Scotch-Irish ancestry did not remain faceless for long. Andy Jackson saw to that.