

AIN't AIN'T THE SAME NO MORE

by Glenn G. Dahlem, Ph.D.

In a recent conversation with a British friend, he and I reflected on evolution of various English words. Both history and geography are factors in changing word definitions, we decided. For example, in England, the word "dame" means a distinguished lady, while in America, it's come more or less to mean any woman.. Our conversation drifted to changes in respectability or grammatical correctness of given words. That topic lead to the inevitable-- "ain't."

I noted how my mother, a university graduate in English and former secretary to a bank president, made sure I knew ain't was grammatically incorrect and bordered on vulgarity. This sentiment was also held by my teachers at school. Yet during family conversations at home, Mother regularly used *ain't* as a synonym for *isn't*. It was then that my English friend made a brilliant observation, " will is to shall as isn't is to ain't," he insisted.

"How's that?" I asked. My friend went on to explain that during the evolution of the English language following the Norman Conquest, many synonyms from different linguistic roots co-existed in Old English. "will" and "shall" were both adverbs used to create future tense, just like "big" and "large" are both adjectives for expressing impressive size. Over the years, especially in America, will and shall gradually drifted apart in exact meaning. Will remained the simple future auxiliary, while shall took on an emphatic connotation--for instance, "I shall return." (General MacArthur) "We shall overcome." (Civil Rights Anthem).

Likewise, he went on, isn't has remained the simple contraction for *is not*, used as always to create the singular present tense linking verb negative. Ain't, on the other hand, is going on to greater, emphatic things. For example, consider expressions like, "It ain't easy." "It ain't over 'til it's over." "I ain't kidding."

It helps writers to examine this general trend of semantic evolution of which isn't and ain't are one small part. What other synonyms fit this general pattern? What about using nouns like *endeavor* or *calling* to describe somebody's job, a job to which he's very dedicated?

Another possibility is using subtle word connotations as setting or characterization aids in fiction or biographical writing. In a story set in the rural South, the adjective *huge* might be replaced by *humongous*, a word with identical meaning, but more in use among persons living amid that setting.

A great example of geographical influence on word evolution is seen in the word *truck*. In the United Kingdom, it's strictly a verb meaning to transport something. In the United States, while also having that meaning, it's a noun too, defining the vehicle doing the transporting. In the U.K. such a vehicle is called a *lorry*. History has had its effects as well.--Just as various conquests, Celtic, Roman, Viking and Norman all influenced the English language in Great Britain, 400 years of immigration into what became the United States and Canada created synonyms not found in European languages.

The best example of this is "ja" for "yes," brought by hordes of Germanic language speaking immigrants to the New World from Germany, Austria, Scandinavia and the Netherlands. Today, almost all English-speaking Americans say "ja" for "yes" at some time or other. Romance speaking immigrants have had their influence too. The French "*cuisine*" has come to mean "*cooking*." Italian terms like "*diva*," "*soprano*," and "*solo*" are in standard English usage. Spanish nouns like "*hacienda*," "*humidor*," and "*burro*" are used interchangeably with "*house*," "*humidifier*," and "*donkey*," their English equivalents, as are many other words.

What does this all mean for writers? First of all, it means that language is forever changing, Ain't has become an acceptable term for emphasis, will and shall are no longer perfect synonyms, and a dame and to truck mean something a bit different on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Secondlv. by cluing in to word origins and evolution, writers and poets can

create more realistic settings and characterizations. Lastly, this leads to greater appreciation for the living English language.--Ain't all this stuff fun?