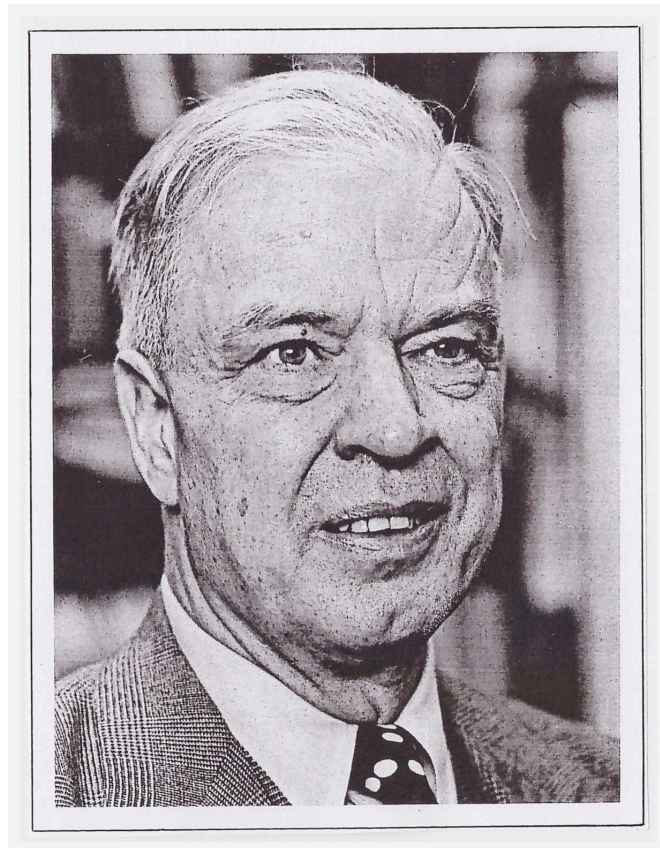


THE FIRST AMONG AMERICAN-BORN MODERN DIALECTOLOGISTS



Raven Ioor McDavid, Jr.

**(October 16, 1911, Greenville, South Carolina - October 21, 1984,
Chicago, Illinois)**

McDavid's essays "show a prejudice toward data rather than toward theory; but a field worker is obligated to write down what the informant says, not what the informant thinks he intended to say";

from: *Varieties of American English*, Essays by Raven I. McDavid, Jr., selected and introduced by Anwar S. DIL, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1980, Author's Postscript, 354.

As a dialectologist McDavid had always been faithful to the data; he remarked that “for many linguists *data* has become the most obscene of all four-letter words”; from “Carry you home once more”, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 73, 1972: 192-195.



McDavid was an undergraduate at Greenville’s Furman University from which he received his B.A. in 1931. He went on to graduate school at Duke University where he received his M.A. in 1933 and his Ph.D. in 1935 with a dissertation on Milton as a political thinker. McDavid did further graduate work at the University of Michigan and Yale University.

At the Citadel, a military academy in Charleston, South Carolina, McDavid was an English instructor from 1935-1938. From there he went on to teach at Michigan State University in East Lansing and Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio.

While at the Citadel, McDavid gathered data for an *American Speech* article on the in-group language of the students, indicating that the students had more than a superficial acquaintance with the shady ladies of that Southern city, and this caused him to be persona non grata with that military establishment.

During the summer of 1937 McDavid participated in the Second Linguistic Institute, held at the University of Michigan and taught by famous scholars in the field such as Leonard Bloomfield, Edward Sapir, Bernard Bloch, and Hans Kurath. Bloch was teaching a course in dialect geography using McDavid as an informant because of his Greenville, South Carolina, dialect. Here McDavid was also introduced to H.L. Mencken’s three volume work *The American Language* which he condensed to one volume, published in 1963, with annotations and modifications reflecting developments after 1948. The Linguistic Institute was the strongest impetus to McDavid’s career. He began

to study American English as it was then spoken, an activity only interrupted during the World War II years, when he was called upon to do war-related work at the Army Language Section in New York City. McDavid was assigned mainly to two projects, the development of materials for the study of Burmese and materials for Italians to learn English. He also worked on a dictionary of spoken Chinese.

McDavid held his first regular academic post in English linguistics at Western Reserve University, where he directed his first doctoral students (1952-1957). In 1957 he became visiting associate professor in the English department of the University of Chicago and associate professor the following year, and was promoted to a professorship, again one year later. He remained there until his retirement in 1977.

McDavid died of a heart attack in Chicago at the age of 73 as he and his second wife Virginia, who was also a linguist and a staunch collaborator especially on atlas work with her husband, were driving from their home to see an exhibition at the Art Institute in Chicago.

McDavid has an enormous oeuvre to his credit. His Ph.D. on Milton remained unpublished. The following publications deserve to be mentioned here:

“Causatives in Burmese” (1943) with William S. Cornyn in *Studies in Linguistics* 1, 1-6.

“Burmese Phonemics” (1945) *Studies in Linguistics* 3, 6-17.

The structure of American English (1958) with W.Nelson Francis, New York: Ronald Press Co.

MENCKEN, H.L. (1963) *The American Language: An inquiry into the development of English in the United States*. 4th ed. and 2 supplements, abridged with annotations and new material by Raven I. McDavid, Jr., New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

La langue des américains (1972) with Guy Jean Forgue, Paris: Aubier Montaigne.

KRETZSCHMAR, William A., James B. McMILLAN, Lee A. PEDERSON, Roger W. SHUY & Gerald UDELL (eds.) (1979), *Dialects in culture: Essays in general dialectology by Raven I. McDavid, Jr.* University, AL: The University of Alabama Press.

DIL, Anwar S. (ed.) (1980) *Varieties of American English. Essays by Raven I. McDavid, Jr.* Stanford, CA. Stanford University Press.

The mirth of a nation. America's great dialect humor (1983) with Walter Blair, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.

From 1945 to 1950 McDavid conducted over 500 interviews for the linguistic atlas project at Kurath's request – first on the Atlantic seaboard and then in the north central states. These investigations, which he had begun as early as 1941, led to his life's work of linguistic geography.

McDavid is best known for his work in linguistic geography, both regional and social. The first major outcome of his work in this field was *The pronunciation of English in the Atlantic states; based upon the collections of the linguistic atlas of the Eastern United States*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1961, written together with Hans Kurath. Lexicography, an interest of McDavid's dating back to his dictionary work during the war years, attracted his attention again later in his career. Among other areas he investigated the prepublication criticism of the controversial *Webster's Third*. See also his *Dialect labels in the Merriam third* (1979). University AL: The University of Alabama Press.

McDavid was no doubt the leading researcher in American English speech patterns. He made a significant contribution not only to traditional dialectology, but also to the study of social variation. Without him, variationists could not have made their advances.

Small wonder that McDavid received many academic awards: he was a Rosenwald Fellow, a Fulbright Fellow, a senior fellow for the National Endowment for the Humanities, a fellow of the American Anthropological Association and received the David H. Russell award for distinguished research. Moreover, he was president of the American Dialect Society and received honorary doctorates in letters from Furman University, the Sorbonne in Paris and from Duke University.

He also helped generously many young colleagues to get established in the field. McDavid entrusted me, to provide one example, with Guy S. Lowman's interviews he conducted in southern England which I edited and published in 2 volumes in 1975. He also put me on the list of consulting editors of the then new *Journal of English Linguistics*. In short, Raven was a great scholar and a fine person. I, for one, owe much to him.

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