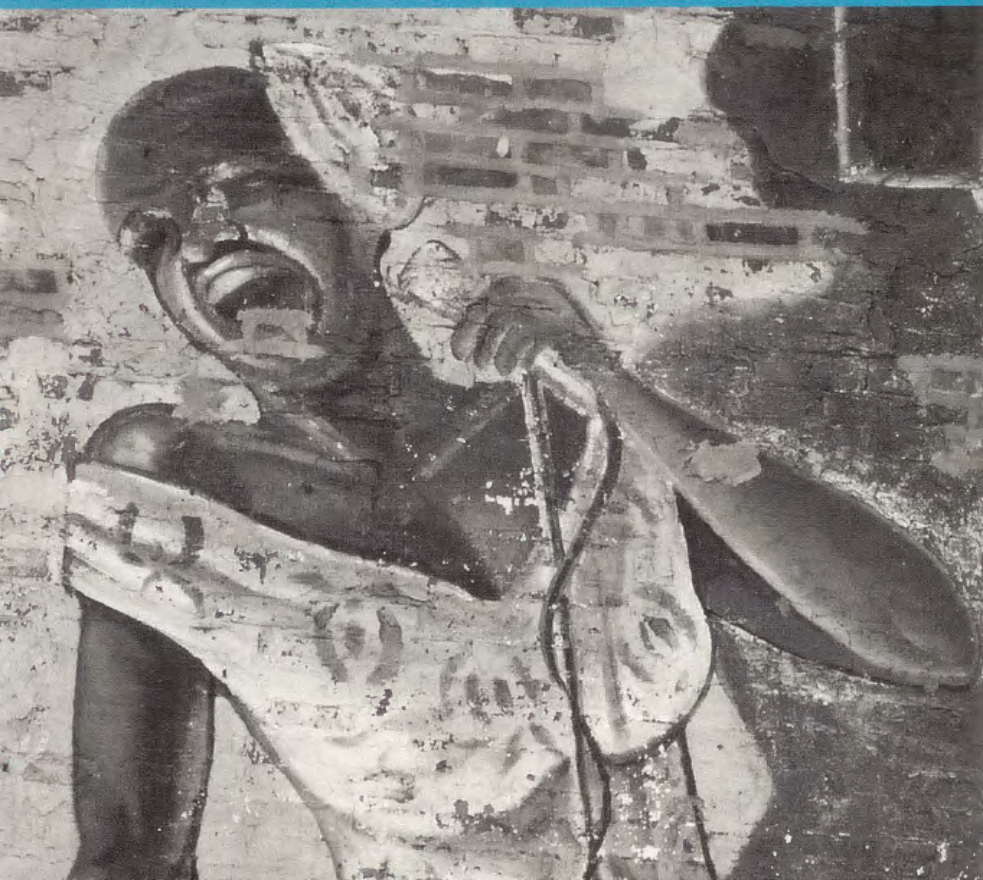


“Chicagoan Accent”  
and Dialectal Speech  
in Media



## Identity, Emblem, and Non-Standard

BY DARIAN GIER

**S**ince the very beginning of human urban civilization in Mesopotamia, multilingualism and multidialectalism have been constants of urban life (Miller, 1986, p. 5). The American city of Chicago, Illinois, possesses a history of linguistic diversity so extreme that it can rival any other urban environment in history in sheer number of spoken languages. In the early 20th century, Chicago was home to 14 different languages each spoken by more than 10,000 persons (Miller, 1986). Chicago in 1904 featured newspapers in 10 languages and church services in at least 20 (Miller, 1986). This wildly diverse linguistic and cultural situation was largely the product of the demand for labor resulting from large-scale commercial and industrial expansion. Suddenly, by the mid-19th century, what was previously a sandy marsh on the Chicago River was the destination of choice for a tremendous influx of foreign immigrants and domestic migrants.

Despite all this linguistic variation and the existence of multiple dialects, a singular "Chicagoan accent" emerged in the early part of the 20th century, emblematic of a heavily populated and diverse city, and

recognized as something truly Chicagoan by local and national media alike. From linguistic standardizing attempts made by early literary journals and Chicago newspaper articles warning of the dangers of "Chicogoese" to the *Saturday Night Live* skits of the early 1990s featuring "Bill Swerski's Superfans," Chicago's trademark accent has been feared at times and adored at others. Its specific pronunciation notoriously differs from "Standard" American English; but who, if anyone in Chicago, truly speaks with such an accent? It cannot be every Chicagoan, as rampant dialectal and lingual variation continues to exist in Chicago, cut along socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, and neighborhood lines. Within the American media, proponents for the strict use of Standard English have used their institutions' influence to wage cultural war against American dialects. Chicago's (and the nation's) linguistic and dialectal history has been subject to a progressive movement from standardizing institutions of the printed word (i.e., newspapers and literary journals) toward monolingualism and uniform American speech. Despite these linguistic-standardizing efforts, and amid continual multilingual diversity, why does one specific accent persist as the "Chicagoan accent" in the eyes of the media? How can this single form of speech be representative of an entire urban environment? Or is the "Chicagoan accent" just a creation of the media, and if so, why has this substandard deviation become socially emblematic for such a linguistically diverse city? Certainly not all Chicagoans speak in the same dialect, so which speakers in Chicago truly identify with this form of speech and consider it their proper means of speech?

This examination into the Chicago urban linguistic environment and its characterization in the media attempts to accomplish the following goals: examine the history of Chicago's dialects in mainstream media, their personifications, and opinions regarding them, whether

comedic or not, in order to determine how the commonly accepted “Chicagoan accent”—the speech personified mainly by residents of Chicago’s South Side, white working-class communities—came to be emblematic of the city in the local and national media. I argue that white working-class speech in Chicago became an adored emblem of the city because of its only slight derivation from Standard English. White working-class speech is phonologically a derivation from American English speech that is relatively close in form and pronunciation to the speech that is accepted by the dominant, white, upper-class sociocultural consciousness in America. Therefore, white working-class speech is no longer a source of anxiety for the most dominant, English-speaking cultural institutions in America (media, printed word), which dominate cultural attitudes and capital. Instead, Chicago’s white working-class speech is adopted and held in higher esteem than “othered” forms of speech, such as African American Vernacular English, and foreign languages spoken in Chicago, which deviate much farther from the norm, the mythical, English-only “Standard” in America. This comfortably small distance from the spoken “Standard,” the middle-class position that many of its speakers achieved, and their homogenous white racial group, has allowed white working-class speech to be adopted as a cultural “pet” of the most powerful cultural institutions and classes in Chicago, and to become emblematic for an entire city. However, although some adore such speech as distinctly Chicagoan, others will always scorn it. In either case, it may be something familiar, but it is still “other,” and it will arouse some who feel it should be standardized.

Switching to a field-study perspective, I will first explore the speech of Chicago’s white working-class through linguistic evidence that describes the distinct phonetics and vocabulary of what is characterized as the “Chicagoan accent.” And to conclude, I will draw on some basic

ethnographic research and discuss how being personified by the media and viewed as non-Standard by the rest of Chicago and the United States has only contributed to Chicago's South Side, white working-class population's constructs of its own social identity. Human speech is emblematic of each unique cultural identity worldwide. We will learn that on Chicago's South Side the "Chicagoan accent" is boldly accepted as a source of pride by a noble and self-respecting community.

**T**he creation of Chicago's cultural make up was the result of many influences over a short, but intense urban history. As early as the 1840s, widespread economic expansion began in Chicago, creating a cultural melting pot of settlers from practically every European nationality. Changing industrial and technological methods shaped every facet of Chicago's history and development. The North-eastern Illinois Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (1960), a joint state- and municipal-area planning agency, divided the city's history into three distinct transportation eras: the Water Transportation Era (1840–1880), the Railroad Era (1880–1920), and the Automobile Era (1920–1960). Each era not only determined the possibilities of industrial production and distribution, but also the influx of immigrants and resettling Americans. By the end of the Water Transportation Era, Chicago's population had grown steadily from a small post on the Chicago River with a founding population of 4,470 in 1840 to an established town with a population of 112,172 by 1860 (Population Division, 1998). Though clearly more than modest growth, this twenty-fold population increase is dwarfed by the tremendous influx of settlers that took place during the Railroad Transportation Era: between 1880 and 1890, Chicago's already dense population of 503,185 more than doubled to 1,099,850, then more than tripled by 1900, with a population of 1,698,575 (Population Divi-

sion, 1998). Between 1840 and 1900, Chicago jumped from the 92nd largest city in America to the 2nd largest (Population Division, 1998). This unprecedented urban growth threw a unique blend of settlers together in Chicago, as each group of newcomers brought their own cultural and linguistic identities to the region.

Beginning with Chicago's founding, many native-born Americans of Anglo-Saxon heritage came to the city from New England for commercial ventures, establishing an educated upper class that spoke Standard American English. In addition, European-born immigrants, largely of German, Irish, and Swedish origins, formed the first immigrant wave to Chicago after 1840. Primarily after 1880, a second wave of European immigrants came to Chicago, largely from Eastern Europe: Greeks, Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Czechs, Croats, Serbians, Austrians, Italians, and Hungarians all made their way into the city to find employment and start new lives in America. After 1900, the third great wave of migrants came to Chicago, African Americans from the southern United States as part of the first and second Great Migrations. During the 1910s and 1920s, the African American population of Chicago grew by 138% (*The Great Migration*, n.d.). Later in the 20th century, large populations of Hispanic immigrants from Central America arrived in Chicago, representing a quarter of Chicago's population by the year 2000.

Chicago neighborhoods became arranged geographically by ethnic and racial boundaries. Strict neighborhood segregation has created many socioeconomic and linguistic groups, earning Chicago a reputation as one of the most segregated cities in the United States. Germans, largely becoming members of America's middle class, established themselves primarily on the North Side around Lincoln Square along with upper-class whites. Meanwhile, middle- and lower-class Irish settled on the South Side west of Ashland Avenue in communities like Bridgeport.

Later on, Italians and Greeks settled on the West Side of Chicago in communities like West Town, west of the downtown area, or the "Loop" (a Chicago localism based on the circular track of the city's elevated train). And finally, the large populations of Eastern European immigrants occupied parts of Chicago's middle and lower classes, banding together in areas all around the city, in communities such as Hegewisch in East Chicago, Logan Square on the North Side, and West Town. These diverse immigrants came to Chicago native-speakers of their respective country's languages. With each new American-born generation, and each new exposure to the highly varied linguistic "melting pot" produced by migrancy, Chicago's language community became increasingly complex.

As time has passed, however, the systems of cultural power that grew with America's own self-conception of nation-statehood forced this diversity into the "down and out" marginality of an ideal singular "Culture," with a normative form of speech: mythical "Standard" English (Silverstein, 1996). The origins of a society believing itself to be of one People, one Culture, and one Language have their roots in the European archetype of the nation-state, upon which America's forefathers constructed its founding doctrine. America, despite great linguistic diversity, conceives of itself as a singular speech community where every individual conforms to a dominant ideal of Standard English monoglotism, enforced by the standardizing public institutions of cultural capital, such as publishing, education, radio, and television, which maintain the linguistic standard (Silverstein, 1996, p. 286). To be sure, no historical person has ever spoken perfect Standard English; it is merely an ideal attempt at uniform cultural praxis by a society conceiving of itself as one (Silverstein, 1996). And yet adherence to Standard English in America has enforced cultural hegemony over vast linguistic variance and con-

tributes to determining America's social stratification: speakers seen as closer to the Standard, such as the higher educated, English monolinguals, are seen as having more social and commercial value as opposed to any lesser-educated, "accented," dialect, or foreign-language speaker (Silverstein, 1996). Other languages and speech communities in the United States are "othered" by Standard dominance, and made to seem culturally and commercially unvalued, unimportant, lower class, and unrepresentative of the best social qualities in American culture. By contrast, to be a monoglot, Standard English speaker is to be accent-less, neutral, and valued. Silverstein argues,

Valorized as an instrument of maximally clear denotational communication, and indexically associated with those to whom its use has made accessible highly valued characteristics, Standard English becomes a gradiently possessible commodity, access to which should be the "natural," "rational" choice of every consumer equal-under-the-law (God's and the country's), and lack of which can be seen in this symbolic paradigm as a deficit, much like vitamin deficiency (in the natural, physiological variant), or lack of a good wardrobe or proper facial make-up or freshened body odors for personal attractiveness (in the self-expression variant), or an affliction of poor background hindering one's ability to blend into the corporate background (in the Cultural, etiquette-like variant) (1996, p. 295).

Hence, measured against the Standard, it is not enviable, culturally or commercially, to speak something perceived as other in America. The tremendous linguistic variance Chicago exhibited in the late-19th and early 20th-centuries would presumably and eventually fade toward a



Standard English monoglottism. But true to Silverstein's theory, such uniform Standard English usage in America would simply seem like the cultural pipe dream it truly is. There continues to be tremendous linguistic diversity throughout America's and Chicago's populations, albeit the importance of this diversity is eclipsed by the hegemony of the Standard. According to the Modern Language Association (the MLA, without a doubt, a powerful standardizing cultural institution itself), Cook County was home to over 3,500,000 non-English speakers according to the 2000 census (Modern Language Association, n.d.). Meanwhile, the findings of dialectologists since 1972 indicate that the expected convergence of dialects in America (particularly in its urban centers) has not occurred. Research indicates that dialects diverge over time in urban centers, rather than converge to a uniform standard as standardizing media institutions and "folk" beliefs about language postulate (Labov 1994, p. 23). William Labov described this phenomenon as *shift*, finding that it occurs primarily in the speech of adolescents forming social group membership (1994).

If dialects are not becoming more uniform, and the dialectal vernaculars of many Chicagoans remain largely differentiated, how has a single working-class white dialect and accent become emblematic for Chicago as a whole, to both local and national audiences? A historical analysis of media's tendencies toward dialectal representation can explain the rise of the speech form and its caricatured speaker as emblem. However, first we must consider the rudimentary speech itself. Is there truly a white working-class form of speech in Chicago uniform to all its purported users? Where do such speakers reside within the city? What does the accent/dialect sound like and what are its components? What are its linguistics roots? And in discussing such speakers, we must also consider their own ideas of self-conceptualization and identity. How might they feel about their own speech?

We must first define precisely the terms “dialect” and “dialect literature.” Linguists themselves have struggled to find a concrete definition for dialect, and there have been many different interpretations. For our purposes, we will refer to Webster’s Dictionary’s second definition of dialect:

One of the subordinate forms or varieties of a language arising from local peculiarities of vocabulary, pronunciation, and idiom. (In relation to modern languages usually spec. A variety of speech differing from the standard or literary “language”; a provincial method of speech, as in “speakers of dialect”).

Dialect may vary by region, social class, and ethnic makeup, and represents different forms of social identity. Built into this definition are important themes we will address: social subordination and opposition to “the standard or literary ‘language.’” As Dennis Baron writes, “the very definition of what constitutes a language or a dialect is influenced by political factors as well as by linguistic ones” (Woolley, 2000, p. 18). In the case of dialect literature or usage in media, I use Lisa Woolley’s definition: “writing [or speaking] in dialect refers to any attempt to call attention to the speech of a particular region, social class, or ethnic group, especially when the effort involves a departure from conventional spelling, syntax, or word choice” (p. 18).

According to *The Atlas of North American English*, which draws geographic determinants of the United States by regional dialect, Chicago is a member of the Inland North American dialectal region (Labov, 2006) and shares dialectal characteristics with other cities in the region, most notably Detroit. This region exhibits the Northern Cities Vowel Shift (NCS) (Labov, 1994, p. 185). The Northern Cities Vowel Shift is a systematic, rotational pattern of vowel pronunciation. It dictates the

shifting of long and back vowels forward and upward, such that the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) /a/ found typically in *father* for speakers without the shift comes to resemble the /æ/ in *cat* for speakers with it. Short vowels moving downward and back in the phonetic scheme, such that the pronunciation of *caught* by speakers who exhibit the shift becomes more like *cot* (Labov, 1994, p. 177–201). This shift is the fundamental speech trait that most newcomers to Chicago initially perceive as uniquely Chicagoan. The shift is not unique to Chicago, however, and can be found in large cities across the northern United States, such as Buffalo, Rochester, Cleveland, and Detroit. But the character of any two American cities is never uniform, and neither is the speech of any two American speakers, social classes, or regions. Dialectologists have termed the particular speech of individual speakers an *idiolect*, a dialect personified by an entire region a *regiolect*, and the speech of a particular social class or division a *sociolect* (Mundell, 1973). So what speech attributes are inherent to Chicago alone?

Anthropologists and linguists have studied Chicago speech forms and have found that speech is widely divided by race, class, and neighborhood. In his article, “The Pronunciation of English in Metropolitan Chicago,” Lee Pedersen recorded and classified social-speech differences in Chicago. Pedersen conducted interviews with a wide variety of Chicago residents and found speech qualities, such as patterns of pronunciation and vocabulary, reflect social demarcations in Chicago (1965, p. 64–71). His 1965 study indicated that the fronting of vowels (NCS) and the use of “d” sounds for those of “th” were found most prevalently among middle-class and lower-class white speakers (p. 66–67). Though sociolinguistic research of this kind is relatively new and virtually nonexistent before the 1960s, Chicagoan dialectal speech and specific speech traits inherent to the white working-class have been parodied in media

for years as emblematic of Chicago life and character. Most importantly, the findings of Pedersen document a truly normative white working-class speech form.

For the discipline of dialectology there is no conclusive explanation of how the essential traits of Chicagoan, white working-class speech came into existence. Since its formal inception at Harvard in 1889, dialectology's purpose has been primarily concerned with documenting general differences in speech patterns among speakers rather than determining linguistic genealogy, which is the task of historical linguistics (Mundell, 1972, p. 30). This is a work of linguistic anthropology that attempts to determine a form of speech's relation to a distinct social identity and examines the portrayal of such speech form and identity in mainstream culture. Determining the distinct linguistic genealogy of the "Chicagoan accent" would warrant an alternate work of equal or greater length. However, we can speculate, if briefly, on the dialect's origins. As a result of linguistic contact, perhaps the use of /d/ for "th" sounds in white working-class speech in Chicago is caused by German influence, because the German language lacks the "th" phoneme altogether and instead uses /d/, as in "der," "die," and "das," the three gendered determinations of the definite article *the* in German's nominative case. However, without absolute historical proof, it is not certain that this is actually the case. There are more specific direct combinations of English and foreign languages in Chicago, such as "Poglish," the combination of Polish and English, but these are not the same as the white working-class speech we are discussing. White working-class speech in Chicago has certainly seen a variety of different European influences; however, aside from the few essential dialectal traits we have discussed, the speech is quite similar to Standard English. It is probable that systematic shifts in spoken language, like the Northern Cities Vowel Shift, are simply the result of human communal living. Their

occurrence is not random, but instead “the use of these language variants is determined by a pattern of social and stylistic norms” (Labov, 1994, p. 78). However, they are largely a subconscious byproduct of language use (Labov, 1994, p. 78). Language is a dynamic aspect of culture that is constantly changing as people influence one another, from peer to peer or from generation to generation, in ways that we ourselves, the speakers, may not realize.

In another study of speech in Chicago titled “Chicago Phonology” by Alva L. Davis, further research was done on white working-class speech which began to paint a more precise picture of the identity of lower-class speakers, and in particular, their speech’s perceived relation to Standard English (1966). Davis found lower-class, native-Chicagoan white speech to be phonologically very similar to middle-class speech and grammatically very similar to upper-class speech (p. 18). Aside from the fronted vowel pronunciation, the common substitution of /t/ for /θ/ (the “th” sound, often at the end of words, as in “dat ole’ Sout’ Side”), and especially the trademark substitution of /d/ for “th” in the words *the*, *those*, and *this*, the speech of contemporary middle- and lower-class white speakers in Chicago is the virtually the same as American, upper-class Standard English (p. 18–19).

This linguistic proximity is one central reason why the populations of middle- and lower-class white speakers in Chicago have risen to a recognizably emblematic position. Though it is perceived by Standard speakers as inherently non-Standard, and continues to be scorned, the speech of middle- and lower-class whites in Chicago has become a more or less uniform, close phonological deviation from Standard English speech. Most interesting about Davis’s research is the claim that white working-class “informants show an awareness of ‘correct’ forms” (1966, p. 18). This deliberate “misuse” of American English indicates a connec-

tion to a non-Standard identity of speech — a stubborn, proud identity grounded in speaking non-Standard. Thus, at least by the mid-1960s, evidence exists that white working-class Chicagoans were a self-conscious community that proudly stood apart from the rest of Chicago. Perhaps this attitude is precisely what has earned them their reputation with, and criticism from, standardizing institutions like the media. Before sociolinguistic research documented Chicago's working class in the 1960s, what prior evidence of dialects in Chicago existed and what were general feelings regarding them? To answer this question, we must turn to the best sources we have from earlier times: the media and printed word.

As early as the late-19th century, spoken American dialects and their representation in print in Chicago were a source of social-class division and controversy in the public eye (much as they are today). Dialect literature of the mid-19th century was seen as a growing, potentially new genre of literature of America's lower classes. Although popular in folk, vernacular culture, Chicago's mainstream printed media viewed dialect literature and speech as a corrupting threat to collective American literature. The few Chicagoan authors who employed forms of dialect in published literary works did so to represent the down-trodden, lower-class members of society, such as immigrants, workers, African Americans, and farmers, in contrast to the conformity promoted by the upper classes (Woolley, 2000, p. 17). In 1893, Henry Fuller referenced an acceptance of dialect literature in his Chicago novel *The Cliff-Dwellers* (Woolley, 2000, p. 18). Later, Sinclair Lewis in his 1922 novel *Babbitt* featured classes on "how to tell dialect stories," demonstrating that some middle-class speakers had an interest in dialects and their users (Woolley, 2000, p. 18).

In contrast, Chicago's schools, literary journals, and newspapers were publicly anti-dialect and supported the linguistic purity of Standard

English pronunciation, spelling, and grammar. Whether motivated by a reforming, progressive ideology or by xenophobic nativism, these standardizing institutions sought to keep dialect literature out of newspapers, books, and journals in Chicago. Such institutions were controlled by the upper-class people of native Anglo-Saxon descent in Chicago and thus consistently represented their point of view on the subject. Although some periodicals at the time claimed to retain a moderate outlook toward lower-brow literature and representations of dialect speech, they functionally served to standardize English by presenting the notion of a singular, correct form of language and written word in America: “. . . those that control writing/printing and reading channels of exemplary communication with language, the operation of which in a society establishes and maintains the Standard” (Silverstein, 1996, p. 286). The speech forms of the lower-class and marginalized members of society, such as those depicted in the dialect literature of early Chicago writers, were avoided, and the cultural standards (whether linguistic or not) of the upper class took precedence (Bonfiglio, 2002, p. 9–10).

Drawing on founding American beliefs in “oneness” of people and culture, promoters of Standard English thought standardizing the national speech community was a means to achieve a collective, singular American identity in a nation comprised of immigrants. European, particularly British, literary criticism condescendingly labeled America’s linguistic situation as fragmented and un-standardized in comparison to the regulated, linguistic European ideals from which America was originally born (Woolley, 2000, p. 20). The fiercely patriotic and anti-immigration periodical *America* (1888–1891), edited in Chicago by Hobart Chatfield-Taylor and Slason Thompson, feared linguistic diversity and condemned it as a symbol of non-uniform culture in opposition to America’s self-conception of national statehood, or, more frankly put,

as un-American (Silverstein, 1996). Since its independence, American society has sought symbols that promote cultural “oneness” and a proud national identity as an emerging world power, despite dramatic immigrant diversity. A nation of standardized speakers and linguistic uniformity, supporters have argued, would give rise to a truly American consciousness, identity, and distinct literature. As Bonfiglio points out, periods of great nationalist sentiment and xenophobia go hand-in-hand with public movements for linguistic purity (2002, p. 23). Fueling this standardizing, linguistic ideal of the late-19th century would be America’s prolific nationalism throughout two world wars and the booming 1950s. It should be noted, however, that widespread nativist beliefs were not remarkably common in Chicago as compared to the Northeast, for example, though their influence is clear in Chicago’s *America* and those of East Coast origins living in Chicago.

*Dial* (1880–1929) was an even more influential Chicago-based literary magazine that addressed the issue of dialect literature from a conservative, upper-class perspective. Springing from the New England philosophies of its editors, mainly those of William Morton Payne, *Dial* tried a more moderate approach to the subject with what it called “intelligent conservatism” (Woolley, 2000, p. 19). According to *Dial*, widespread publishing of dialects would result in their general acceptance as “correct” means of communication in America and the subsequent divergence of English to the point at which commoner speech would become an English vernacular, unintelligible to the upper classes. In turn, proper, standard written English would be intelligible to only the elite (Woolley, 2000, p. 23). Many readers of and contributors to *Dial* believed that to create great works of literature, masterpieces of purely American literature, the nation required a monoglot culture, and that no literary masterpiece had been created by a multilingual culture



(Woolley, 2000, p. 29). Although it publicly attempted to weigh issues of non-Standard versus Standard literature and speech, *Dial* ultimately resorted to the xenophobic rhetoric of elite sentiment (Woolley, 2000, p. 19). Each anti-dialect complaint by the upper-class readers and editors of *Dial* was based in the fear that giving linguistic credit to dialect literature would give social credit, sociocultural recognition, and legitimacy to members of society such as lower-class immigrants and African Americans (Woolley, 2000, p. 31). The readers of *Dial*, having secured their position at the top rung of the American social hierarchy, wished to protect their powerful status. They believed that dialect speech in print would empower lower-class Americans, whom they deemed un-American. Raising the marginalized members of society culturally was a step in the direction of raising their entire socioeconomic status, shifting the status quo of sociocultural power and influence in American society.

Newspapers in Chicago were even more pervasive promoters of American Standard English. While *Dial* and *America* had their select group of elite, devoted readers (*Dial* was, however, one of the leading periodicals of its kind at the time), newspapers in Chicago had a much wider audience, penetrating to deeper rungs of society. With a much larger and more diverse readership, newspapers' power to promote the idea of Standard English and shun dialects was greatest among all institutions of the printed word. They achieved this not only by holding their own institution to the strict English Standard in print, as Silverstein described, but also by exhibiting anti-dialect and standardizing attitudes themselves, at times, even reporting proudly on other hegemonic linguistic institutions trying to accomplish the same goal of standardization (Silverstein, 1996).

The *Chicago Tribune* is perhaps the best example of an anti-dialect, culturally influential newspaper in Chicago. Since the *Tribune's* inception in 1847, it has published many articles addressing the city's public

attitude regarding proper use of the English language. An article printed on April 6, 1900, entitled, "Chicago Idioms," described the passing of "using bad English" from generation to generation: "Whether it is due to the teacher or not, the fact remains that in the matter of correct speaking the child is often the father of the man." The article continues by quoting a member of another standardizing linguistic institution from an elite university, Harvard University professor Barrett Wendell. To warn of the misuse of Standard English, he defines a solecism as something to be avoided in correct speech: "If a given construction does not make good sense, and is not an idiom, it is a solecism; and a solecism is a violation of good use. That seems to me the whole story."

Two days earlier, on April 4, 1900, the *Tribune* had run an article titled "Bad English 'Chicogoese': District Superintendents Say Incorrect Speech of Teachers is Due to Local Dialect Influences." These articles are excellent examples of the explicit means by which the *Tribune* endorsed an anti-dialect and standardizing perspective. Not only did it publish a Standard English daily paper (the implicit means of standardization), the *Tribune* also reported on topics, such as this one, that shaped beliefs about proper and improper language. In this case, the paper documented the meeting and subsequent declaration of Chicago's superintendents regarding school teachers' use of "Chicogoese" in the classroom. The two articles reinforce one another: in the latter article, Chicago superintendents blamed teachers for children's use of bad English or a Chicago dialect, while the former article attributed it to parents. Superintendents occupy a high official position within the educational hierarchy and dictate curricula and standards as opposed to teachers who apply them. As influential members of a linguistic-standardizing institution, the Chicago public schools, they sent a message of anti-dialectalism and standardization:

When a teacher says 'that ain't' or 'it don't,' splits her infinitives, uses adjectives where adverbs should be used, ends a sentence with a preposition, asks where something 'is at,' places modifying clauses out of order, forgets the conjugation of verbs, or does any of the other things of which trustees complain, it is simply a lapse into the local dialect, according to superintendents.

The superintendents demonstrate a naturalized view of dialect as if it is a necessary and organic function of uneducated human life that must be cleansed from the mouths and minds of Chicago speakers. From their point of view, those who employ Standard speech are socially valuable, positively influential members of society, and those who exhibit non-Standard speech are unvalued and incorrect, negative members (Silverstein, 1996, p. 291). "When teachers use bad English, they simply lapse into Chicago dialect. They are nearly all Chicago born," states one superintendent. Again, this use of the word "lapse" connotes the "naturalness" of Chicagooan speech, which should be corrected by education (Silverstein, 1996, p. 291). The superintendents were particularly concerned with their school teachers, whom they viewed as critical agents in society's greater standardizing institution of education.

The *Tribune* recognized in both articles that young people learned speech through a variety of sources, both familial and pedagogical. The "naturalness" of language from the family and society opposed the proper language standardization garnered from education. The former article articulated that social influences, like uneducated parents and peers, will constantly corrupt the speech of developing English users. The latter article recognizes that education should serve as the counter-natural correcting influence for youths. When education fails in this task, it fails its societal purpose.

Chicago's debate regarding dialects continued into the 20th century. By the eve of World War I, new progressive, grassroots institutions joined elite and upper-class efforts to further English standardization. In wartime, public consciousness shifted from equality and representation to nationalist, patriotic sentiment inclined toward national and cultural "oneness." American progressive reform and nativist movements were at their peak, as were pushes for a more standard, monoglot American English (Bonfiglio, 2002). America was at war with a foreign enemy and forced to conceive of itself as "together," "one people" responding to a national challenge. An editorial from *Dial* in 1914 praised new efforts and new organizations to fight dialects: ". . . [T]he new Society for Pure English has recently issued its first pamphlet . . . formulating certain basic principles and urging a return to dialectic naturalness and raciness of expression. Words and idioms that smack of the soil whence they sprang up are to be revived and cherished, while the artificialities of urban speech need to be repressed" (Woolley, 2000). The author not only criticized the dialect speech of immigrants and lower-class peoples, but also criticized overly complex "artificialities" of speech that undermined the eloquence and "Anglicity" of truly *American* Standard English. Maintaining its tradition of supporting proper Standard English, *Dial* favored the creation of a standardizing institution, "The Society for Pure English."

The *Chicago Tribune* also described a similar standardizing institution with roots in American urban culture and with a distinctly progressive and patriotic perspective on speech. The paper published "Nobody Hadn't Ought to Say 'Ain't' Nohow" on March 3, 1918. The article described the plans of the American speech committee of the Chicago Woman's Club to hold a "better speech week" in the near future, where "anybody who makes an error in speech, from the mayor

up to the janitor, will immediately be placed in durance vile as an unpatriotic citizen." (The article is written largely as comedic, with misspellings and sentences written in a broken, seemingly lower-class dialect.) Clearly, according to the reforming attitude of the Chicago Woman's Club, a Chicagoan speaking anything but uniform Standard English was "an unpatriotic citizen." Another *Chicago Tribune* article by Lucy Calhoun from October 22, 1918 under the headline "Women in Wartime" advertised the "better speech week" immediately before it took place from October 27th to November 2nd. It begins, "The people of the United States should all speak the American language, and that language, correctly spoken and written, should be the one in use by all public and private schools." Slogans for "better speech week" included "S.O.S.: Stop Our Slang!" "Speak the Language of Your Flag," and "One Flag, One Country, One Language." No doubt, speaking Standard English was the mark of valued, true American citizens. To speak anything else was simply un-American.

The cultural legacy of the world wars was permanent in America, and by the 1950s, widespread progressive language reform and public faith in American identity, ideology, and culture erased earnest fears of a fragmented and irregular American English in mainstream culture. With standard and monoglot beliefs firmly in place in the American consciousness, the media began to look differently upon dialects and their subsequent meanings.

The new attitude of some Chicago writers in print was marked by a gradual shift from condemning to more comedic and accepting. Chicagoan dialects, whether flawed or unrefined, began to take on a new meaning exemplifying the multifaceted origins of Chicagoan society. Two wars and the American economic boom in the 1950s had eased the fears of the elite linguistic class. The Chicagoan accent was no longer

seen as an immediate threat to national cultural identity in light of America's national success, but instead as just an elicitation of unrefined culture to be avoided. Chicago's dialects had not been accepted into standard print or become unintelligible to upper-class peoples as had been feared. Instead the accent began to be seen as merely a variation of the English Standard, a slight declension from the top sociocultural stratosphere that posed no immediate threat to those speakers in cultural control. Its personification also served as a fond reminder of the humble origins of the generations of Chicago's European immigrants, who over time had assimilated and become essential members of the middle-class, standardized speech community.

To elaborate this idea, one can map a social stratification of Chicago speech forms. The "Chicagooan accent," with its trademark speech of the white working-class, is close to Standard English. There are two connected reasons that explain why Chicagooan white working-class speech remains in this comfortable, slightly subordinate position in the social stratification of spoken American English: one, social awareness of European immigrant influence in Chicago's history and the generally higher social esteem whites receive in the United States due to their common position in the top rung of American racial stratification, and two, the phonic and grammatical traits exhibited by white working-class speech in relation to Standard English. On the first point, the history of Chicago was largely determined by European immigrants (as described previously) and their descendents. They served as the backbone of the rapidly growing Chicago economy. Their descendents rose to much higher positions than simple labor: the Daley family, both father, Richard J. Daley, and son, Richard M. Daley, came from the Irish, working-class neighborhood of Bridgeport on the South Side of Chicago to become a mayoral dynasty in Chicago. Chicago's white

upper-class public consciousness of the latter half of the 20th century came to accept that these people largely represent true Chicagoans; they are the people who made the city what it is today, an essential part of its creation. From a top-down, white-dominated social perspective, they could comfortably serve as a likeable and familiar emblem of the rougher parts of Chicago. In addition to public consciousness regarding Chicago's cultural history, Alva Davis's study documented that lower- and middle-class whites in Chicago demonstrated fronting of vowels in the Northern Cities Vowel Shift, the use of /d/ for "th" words, and the substitution of "r" for the "th" and the end of words, as in the common Chicagoan pronunciation of the phrase "come wit" (1966, p. 18–19). Other than these pronunciations and the vowel shift, white working-class speech in Chicago is grammatically and syntactically the same as English taught in schools and spoken by the educated. Therefore, though the accent is certainly a dialectal variation of what many upper- and middle-class educated speakers would define as Standard English, and thus still to be avoided, it is not as far from Standard in form, grammar, and pronunciation, as other American dialects such as African American Vernacular English (which would be seen as a much greater derivation from the Standard on the sociocultural stratification).

The accent and its speakers' reputation were not seen as threateningly foreign in the self-conceptualizations of xenophobic, standardizing, white, upper-class American culture. Instead, the white working-class archetype and its trademark speech form have become a welcome characterization of "us" to some Chicagoans, a self-conceptualization of white society considering its own humble beginnings. A public consciousness driven by white upper-class perspectives in Chicago could not make an emblem of an African American speaker of African American Vernacular English, or a Mexican American speaker of Spanish; these

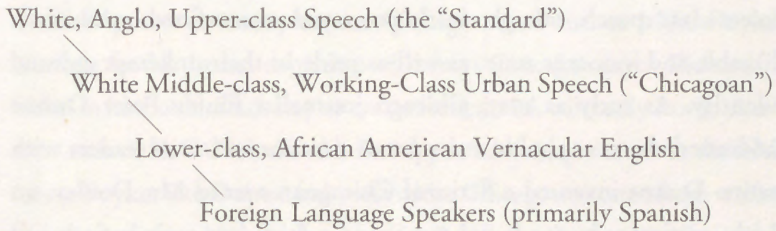


Figure 1.

figures are too foreign and unfamiliar to white-centered cultural consciousness and language to speak for the entire city. Even non-whites can exhibit a white consciousness as it exists in American society, a phenomenon described by W.E.B. Du Bois as the double-consciousness of blacks, the consciousness of both black and white personhood (1903). According to linguists Vernon S. Larsen and Carolyn H. Larsen, when asked to rate what English pronunciation in speakers invokes in the minds of listeners, even African Americans themselves see their speech as "more unpleasant, less educated," and "tend to favor the white pronunciation" (1966, p. 8). This is a surprisingly clear sociolinguistic example of how white working-class speech has become the adored, cultural pet of Chicagoans.

Figure 1 illustrates the social stratification of language in urban areas of Chicago depicting socioeconomic position, education, and cultural influence by speech class. Its linguistic levels move downward and to the right, depicting further societal marginalization and perceived distance from the Standard in public consciousness. This is my own rendering.

Acceptance of the white working-class accent and its inherent stereotype was best expressed in local and national media. Comedic personifications of fictional white working-class Chicagoans and their speech occurred slowly throughout the past century. Characters employing



lower-class speech, though clearly portrayed as unrefined, exhibited a likeable and innocent tone, as well as pride in their unkempt cultural identity. As early as 1913, Chicago journalist Finley Peter Dunne addressed the xenophobic attitudes of *America* and *Dial* readers with satire. Dunne invented a fictional Chicagoan named Mr. Dooley, an Irish immigrant bartender who spoke in a thick (yet entirely fictional) dialect to parody upper-class notions of lower-class dialect speakers. Coming from an Irish background himself, but also a journalist for a number of Chicago newspapers, including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Herald*, and *Telegram*, and therefore a member of linguistic-standardizing institutions, Dunne felt at liberty to express ideas through Mr. Dooley with the quality of an inside joke (Woolley, 2000, p. 34). With Mr. Dooley, Dunne critiqued the prejudices of the upper class as intolerant and conforming, assigning credit to the character of Chicago's lower-class dialect speakers and their origins. His depiction showed dialect speakers not as primitive and ignorant, but simply as Chicagoans with a different form of speech. Dunne's Mr. Dooley demonstrates the existence of a less anxious, more accepting sentiment toward the language of the unrefined masses. During his time, he was a lone voice, swimming upstream against a mainstream media that disagreed with his views. But Dunne's work was a salient, early message that the unrefined lower-class white masses of Chicago were an increasingly essential part of the city's social identity. Public awareness of these people had to honor their existence, if only marginally.

Chicago's booming population in the 19th- and early-20th centuries was stocked with European immigrants who quickly formed the basis of Chicago's middle and lower classes. But characterizations of the "Chicagoan accent" as working-class white speech from the South Side of Chicago only gradually became expressions of cultural pride. One of

the best post-war examples was Chicago-based author Mike Royko (famous for his brutal depiction of former Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley in his book, *Boss*). Royko created a fictional, culturally iconic character named Slats Grobник who first appeared in his columns in the mid 1960s. Royko, like Dunne and most white Chicagoans, came from working-class origins. He was the son of a Polish mother and a Ukrainian father, but was also a member of a standardizing institution that determined public consciousness, writing for the *Chicago Tribune*, as well as the *Chicago Daily News* and the *Sun-Times*. Slats was a child of a South Side, working class, Polish family, with an alcoholic father and a strict-tempered mother. In Royko's columns, Slats was a bully in school and lived through comedic tales of adolescence and coming-of-age. Often, Slats's unrefined social identity was the cause of his own comedic downfall, such as failing to get girls, or be successful in school (1973). Although Slats never truly spoke in a non-Standard English dialect like Mr. Dooley, his comedic experiences were emblematic symbols of the heritage and cultural origins that many Chicagoans shared. Unlike his ancestors in dialect and ethnic characterization in Chicago's media, though decidedly non-Standard, Slats Grobник was a familiar, beloved cultural icon. Slats defined what it was to be Chicagoan, as his life's experiences rang true for so many city residents.

Not all public sentiment about Chicagoan dialect speech was favorable, as many Chicagoans refused to embrace a non-Standard and unrefined identity. Thus, the debate between the promotion of Standard English and dialects continued to rage despite wider acceptance of working-class speech. This ongoing battle of speech philosophies resurfaced in an editorial column by *Chicago Tribune* columnist Bob Greene in 1983. He issued a very strong opinion regarding the "Chicagoan accent." Greene's column, "When Chicagoans Speak, People Leave," criticized Chicago

speech to a point bordering on absurdity: “. . . in Chicago, the voices on the street will not soothe or lull you. In Chicago, the voices you hear will remind you of so many horrible train wrecks.” He continued, “The Chicago accent is ugly and abrasive and painful to the ear. The Chicago accent immediately makes you know that you are not welcome; the message of the Chicago accent is: ‘Go back home.’”

Each position, whether opposed to dialects, like Greene, or seemingly open to them, like Royko and Dunne, places dialects in the non-Standard, marginalized position in society. Each fictitious character, whether Mr. Dooley or Slats, was exemplary of Chicago, but they were certainly not characters exemplary of acceptable mainstream speech. The vast majority of those who had opinions regarding their own speech worked outside of mainstream media. Greene received so many letters from angry Chicagoans blasting his opinion on Chicagoan speech that a few days after his initial article, Greene published another, completely comprised of reactionary letters. Readers were furious with Greene’s point of view. “If you don’t like the way we talk in Chicago, why don’t you leave, and right now,” wrote M.T.D. of Chicago, “How dare you insult all the good people who help pay your salary? Your column was revolting.”

In 1991, a new representation of Chicagoan speech burst into the national media, and to this day, it is still probably the most recognizable depiction of Chicagoan working-class speech. The nationally popular “Bill Swerksi’s Superfans” skit on NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* famously parodied the “Chicagoan accent” which culminated in the famous pronunciation, “Da Bears.” The skit featured comedic actors Mike Myers, Chris Farley, Robert Smigel, and George Wendt as Bob (pronounced “Bab”) Swerksi, filling in for his “brudder Bill.” Both Myers and Farley had been residents of Chicago during their time with Second City The-

atre, and Wendt was a native Chicagoan. The skit's white, working-class, Polish sports fan characters obsessively discussed Chicago sports teams and their uncanny dominance. Special praise was constantly showered upon Chicago sports icons Mike Ditka, former head coach of the Chicago Bears, and Michael Jordan, six-time NBA Champion shooting guard with the Chicago Bulls. The characters were also tremendous fans of some of Chicago's favorite cuisine: Polish sausage and, as they put it, "Da beersss." In linguistic terms, the characters exhibited the essential aspects of Chicagoan white working-class speech: the fronting and raising of vowels as in "Bab" for *Bob*, the use of the consonant /d/ for "th" sounds at the beginning of words, as in "da" for *the* in "Da Bears," and the pronunciation of the /d/ consonant for words that contain the "th" sound in the middle or the end, as in "brudder" for *brother*. The performers' Chicago connections certainly contributed to the skit's accuracy.

The skit's popularity and its quotations became easily recognizable in the popular lexicon, and its characters grew to the status of Chicagoan cultural icons. This was particularly the case on the South Side of Chicago, where the fictional characters supposedly had their origins. The parody was so popular that South Side Bears fans began imitating the speech from the skit, cheering in unison for "Da Bears" at Chicago Bears home football games, taking pride in their own mocked form of speech. A 1991 *Chicago Tribune* article, "Da Real lowdown about 'Da Bears'," by George Papajohn, described this phenomenon: "Chicagoans are imitating people who are imitating Chicagoans. Life is imitating parody." The article also quoted Emory University linguistics professor Lee Pedersen, author of "The Pronunciation of English in Metropolitan Chicago." Pedersen thought the skit was quite accurate linguistically with respect to white working-class Chicagoan speech traits. Pedersen also found it impressive that South Side Bears fans had proudly

embraced the accent and made it their own, by saying, "I think that's a sign of cultural security." Certainly, many white working-class Chicagoans were comfortable with their own social identity, but how would they respond to more direct criticism?

Institutional sentiment for standardization continued to occupy a dominant position in the mainstream American speech community. Some Chicagoans opposed the non-Standard English used by the "Superfans" and its inherent celebration of informality, unrefined identity, and even stupidity. In "The South Side: Equal Parts Pride and Provincialism," *Tribune* journalist Bill Granger described the cultural battle for recognition that still existed in Chicago. Granger wrote that the "Superfans" offended some Chicagoans "because it made everyone look as though they came from, well, the South Side" (1992). Many North Siders did not think this was a good thing. As we have seen, speech forms come with an intrinsic characterization of their speaker; they are always a central mode of demarcation for different social identities—upper class, lower class, racial, regional, sexual, or others. The embrace of the Superfans in Chicago was an embrace of lower-class, uneducated, working-class culture. Attitudes regarding the skit reflect the competition of two alternate cultural identities in Chicago. Humorist Jean Shepherd from northwest Indiana explained the city's geographical and cultural divide: "There was the South Side and there was the rest of the world. The rest of the world was the North Side" (Granger, 1992). Working-class speech of the South Side was scorned by the North Siders, while South Siders flouted criticism and took pride in their speech and their ways. For example, Shepherd states that unlike the Chicago Cubs, who are supported by people from around the country, "da Sox" fans only live in or have association with the tight-knit community of the South Side, and that is fine with them. "The optimism of the South Side irritates the world of North

Siders (which, for all practical purposes, includes everyone in the United States and Canada)," says Granger (1992).

The battle between the stubborn insistence on non-Standard speech of South Side residents in Chicago and its rejection by North Side residents is representative of the eternal national debate regarding standardization of speech. Although standardizing efforts within media, schools, and the printed word have existed in the United States for centuries, a completely uniform nation of Standard English speakers without dialects will never materialize. America is simply too big, its population too diverse, the nature of language too individualized to the idiosyncrasies of every different speaker. But linguistic standardizing efforts throughout American history are a necessary result of the enduring belief that America should be one people, one nation, and therefore a single culture with a single language: a monoglot standard (Silverstein, 1996). Therefore, the debate between English Standard and dialect speakers in America will continue to play out in the media, with the competing embrace and rejection of particular representations of different American subcultures. Because so many Chicagoans can identify with the white working-class speech form and its caricatured speaker, the accent and stereotypical speaker have become emblematic of Chicago, even though many Chicagoans reject the identity for themselves. It is simultaneously scorned as something different and lauded as something familiar. But the North- and South-Side divisions in Chicago are just one example within a nation of highly varied peoples and languages, which somehow continues to imagine itself one people, under one flag, with one proper language.

Finally, leaving behind the media's viewpoints, and free from the paranoid or patronizing perceptions of working-class whites in Chicago, let me conclude with some of the beliefs of real speakers regarding their

own speech and identity. In her work with Chicago speakers on the East Side of Chicago (the area south of 95th Street to 118th Street, between the Calumet River and the Illinois-Indiana State Line) "White Working Class Speech," Robin Herndobler concluded that the typical "Chicagooan accent" is spoken by working-class whites because of its importance as a cultural tradition and a symbol of proud community membership (1977, p. 171). East-Side residents do not exhibit much anxiety in their speech like speakers of Standard English, because they believe in their community and are proud to be a part of it (p. 171). According to Herndobler, white working-class people in Chicago "truly believe and deeply feel that their speech, their whole life style is more direct, more honest, more real than that of the middle-class, academic, or professional [people]" (p. 171). Although its long history of being criticized by Standard speakers, parodied in the media, and fought against by a whole nation of standardizing, monoglot culture, the white working-class "Chicagooan accent" remains a staple of everyday life to many proud Chicagoans.

Growing up in Chicagoland and following Chicago's media, I believed that a singular "Chicagooan accent" existed. To explore my beliefs and why I held them, this work examined the emergence of a particular "Chicagooan accent" and dialect in the context of media. I first determined that speakers from Chicago's white working-class community, mainly residing on the South Side, were the primary users of this form of speech. Chicago's media has raised this particular accent to something iconic and representative of the city as a whole. I have argued that the cause of this is the American linguistic paradigm of cultural adherence to mythical "Standard English," a supposedly singular and correct form of speech that all Americans should demonstrate. In part because it is syntactically close to Standard English, the dialect of white working-class Chicagoans occupies a close but subordinate location to

Standard English in a hierarchy of social value dictated by linguistic traits. More importantly, the personification and elevation of the white working-class speaker was an acceptable self-conception of white society and consciousness. To many, it is lower class and uneducated, but for most Chicagoans, it is a depiction of the city's character, more accurate and familiar than other Chicagoans who are seen as more socially and linguistically distant. To prove this, I have shown how media sentiment toward some dialects has changed gradually, from feared by most, to accepted by most. Highly documented, this ascent of a nationally recognizable and iconic dialect has occurred in a particularly rich local battle that is part of a centuries-old debate over the promotion of standardization in American linguistic institutions, and acceptance of dialects and non-English languages spoken by so many of America's residents. As history indicates, and not surprisingly so, the monglot standard ideal prevails, but it is a necessary outcome of the sociopolitical conception of "oneness" of American society determined by our founding fathers, and should not be viewed as villainous.

As no population of individual language speakers will ever reach complete uniformity, I suspect the debate between standard and dialect will never cease. But as Chicago's white working-class dialect speakers have shown us, real speakers do not live in a debate between standard and non-standard, they simply live in a community. Perhaps the idea for this work of anthropology was conjured from my own self-serving fascination with cultural history in Chicago. But I have always admired the strength of people in Chicago's working-class neighborhoods that believe in their community, are proud of their identity, and continue to speak with that trademark "Chicagoan accent." ■



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