
Social Stigma on “ain't”

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Abstract

‘Ain't’ appeared as a contraction of ‘am not’ around 1600 and then was extended to mean ‘are not’, ‘is not’, ‘has not’ and ‘have not’ later. In the early 18th century it began to be criticized. Though it has been disparaged and its use marks the speaker as being inferior. It has been used even by the best speakers and writers to serve useful purposes. Sociolinguistic force behind ‘ain't’ seems to be taking it to full acceptance.

Introduction

Every language spoken by man undergoes a constant change in pronunciation, in grammatical structure, in word meanings, and in the words themselves. The linguistic history tells us that in Elizabethan era grammar attracted little attention and that the outlines of modern English grammar had been fixed by the time of Shakespeare in the early 17th century there appeared a critical attitude which criticized English for lacking the beauty and regularity of Latin and Greek and for being uncouth and disorderly. As a result, approximately two hundred and fifty books devoted to the criticism of English were published in the 18th century. A laudable effort was made to improve the grammar and syntax of English. Unfortunately, the reformers of English lacked linguistic concepts and were guided by the conceptions that language is a divine institution and that English is a corrupt and degenerate offspring of Latin and Greek. Yet their prescriptions were received, approved, and gathered into text books and were copied from book to book throughout the 19th century and may still be found in the books we use now. On the other hand, English has continued its organic growth until today, only slightly influenced by these rules many of which only faintly resemble the language customs they are supposed to describe.

The rules of traditional grammars conflict with modern linguistic concepts of a language and its functions. This conflict gives rise to confusion in the usage. What school teachers condemn as bad grammar is being used by the best writers and speakers. A similar controversy about the usage of ‘ain't’ is found among the linguists. It is doubtful that any word in English

has been more discussed than it. Some linguists label it as illiterate, some as nonstandard, and some as an uneducated blunder, but some believe that English needs an expression of this sort and so consider it acceptable. The aim of this paper is to research the history of 'ain't' and evaluate its present status.

History of 'ain't'

The most famous disputable word in English is 'ain't'. Its history is both obscure and complicated. Lexicographers and grammarians have written a lot about it, but little of their writing is devoted to its historical investigation. Much of what has been written is to condemn it. Besides, much of the writing is not informative, some of it misinformative. However, on the basis of available evidence we can structure its history.

'Ain't' shows no direct relation to any of the inflected forms of "be": *is, are, am, was, were, etc.* Whether 'ain't' came into existence as a contraction of 'am not' or 'are not' or of both is another complication. It was formerly spelled as 'an't' (or sometimes 'a'n't'). *The Oxford English Dictionary* and *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* have pointed out that 'ain't' is a contraction of 'airn't' (are not), hence by extension used for 'is not' and 'am not' in dialect or colloquial speech. On the other hand, Bremner (1980) says that it is contracted form of 'am not' and extended in illiterate speech to mean 'is not', 'are not', 'has not' and 'have not'.¹ Differing from both the views, Prof. Harold Bender of Princeton in *Word Study* (1939) says that 'ain't' arose almost simultaneously from both 'am not' and 'are not'. However, on the basis of available evidence (because more can be found) the American Dictionary of English Usage has determined that 'ain't' was used as the contraction of 'am not' at the earliest:

Miss Prue: You need not sit so near one, if you have anything to say, I can hear you farther off, I *ain't* deaf.

--William Congreve, *Love for Love*, 1695

The earliest evidence for 'are not' is from 1696:

Lord Foppington: ...these shoes *a'n't* ugly but they don't fit me.

--Sir John Vanbrugh, *The Relapse*.

Jespersen (1909), on the basis of evidence like, "I *an't* vexed, *an't* you an impudent slut," "Presto is plaguy silly tonight, '*an't* he'?" from Jonathan

Swift's *Journal to Stella*, determined that 'an't' began to be used for 'am not', 'is not', and 'are not' around 1710. As to the use of 'ain't' for 'is not', Jespersen advances this third derivation, which Strang (1970) represents as 'isn't' > 'i'n't' > 'e'n't' > 'ain't'. Bender, on the other hand, supposes 'an't' = 'isn't' is simply an extension of the form to the third person. However, it is difficult to be sure how 'ain't' began to be used for third person singular *isn't*.

The use of 'ain't' (*an't*) for 'has not' and 'have not' is found to be a later development, apparently in the 19th century. The earliest citation for it in the *Dictionary of American Regional English* is dated from 1838, but using it for 'has not' and 'have not' is not Americanism, as it is also recorded in English Dialect Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary as a dialect and vulgar variation of 'have not' and 'has not'. The derivation itself is straightforward: 18th century 'ha'n't' for both 'has not' and 'have not' becomes 'an't' by loss of the "h".

Thus, we can say that 'ain't' derives from 'an't' which in turn comes from 'am not' by the way of 'amn't', from 'are not' by the way of 'airn't', form 'is not' through 'i'n't' and 'e'n't' and later from 'have not' and 'has not' through 'ha'n't'. So the relationship of 'ain't' with 'be' and 'have', although it appears obscure on the surface, is obvious. So far as the time of its establishment is concerned, the earliest evidence shows up in the literary sources of the Restoration period. Several negative contractions, like 'won't', 'shan't', 'don't' and 'ain't', seem to have developed around 1600 and appeared in the literature, especially in plays. Mario Pei in the *Story of Language* (1949), asserts that 'ain't' was established in usage by King Charlse II.

How 'Ain't' Became Stigmattzed

'Ain't' once may have been grammatical, but time has driven it from educated speech and writing. Evans calls it unacceptable and Fowler (1965) calls it an uneducated blunder. School teachers call it bad English. It has come to be regarded as a mark of illiteracy and by now has acquired such a stigma that is beyond any possibility of rehabilitation. For these reasons people look down their nose at those who say 'ain't'.

How 'ain't' came to such a disparaged status is as complicated as its origin. In the early 18th century, negative contractions began to be criticized. Addison and Swift were the earliest to disparage them. John Witherspoon (1781) and B. Dearborn (1795) criticized it as vulgar.² Alford

(1866) seems to have singled out 'ain't' first specifically for criticism, as he thinks that it does not have any resemblance to 'am not' and 'are not'.

'Ain't' began to appear for 'is not' in the speech of vulgar and uneducated characters of the 19th and 20th century literature. A vulgar woman in Jane Austene's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) says:

"I am sure I don't pretend to say that there 'an't'."

Charles Dickens puts it into the mouth of his detestable Yorkshire schoolmaster in his *Nicholas Nickleby*:

"So it is," said Squeers. "Ain't it Nickelby?"

As these authors used 'ain't' only in the speech of vulgar characters, they are also responsible for the stigma on it. In the 19th century American pedagogues took care and discretion in the use of negative contractions, including 'ain't'. *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* quotes a man named Peabody's advice to graduates of the Newbury Port Female High School:

"Won't' for 'will not' and ain't for 'is not', or 'are not' are absolutely vulgar, and 'ain't' for 'has not' or 'have not' is utterly intolerable."

Here we find discrimination among the different uses of 'ain't'. The dictionary also mentions a similar discrimination made by John Bechtel in *Slips of Speech* (1903). We also find H. W. Fowler (1965) distinguishing its first person use from other uses and defending this use.³ But this discrimination among different uses is lost now. *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* quotes Opdyke (1939), who says, "There is no such word (*ain't*). Don't use it." He does not recognize the historical connection of 'ain't' to 'am not', 'are not', etc., possibly, because 'an't' which was its earlier form dropped out of use around the end of the 19th century. The exploration of the history of 'ain't' has made it almost obvious that it became stigmatized when its use was extended from 'am not' and *are no t*' to 'is not', 'has not' and 'have not'.

Present Status Of Ain't

Although 'ain't' has been disparaged and stigmatized, it has never ceased to be used. Even today it is used, even in America where James H. Sledd, when *Webster's Third International Dictionary of the English Language* mentioned the usage note that 'ain't' was used orally in most parts of the U.S. by many cultivated speakers, especially in the phrase 'ain't I', stated

that any red blooded American would prefer incest to 'ain't'. The reason is its necessity for the expression of particular types of feelings and ideas in a particular type of style. The following are the uses of 'ain't':

A. In letters to mark close and warm relationship:

I trust you find my hand writing as bad as your own. I *ain't* strong enough to hit a key tonight.

- Flannery O'Conner, Letter, 26 March, 1951

B. In a congruently informal style, that may be spoken - as in an interview or a talk - or written - as in an article. In writing it is especially used to emphasize informality.

C. In fiction, drama, and reportage for characterizing purposes, its utterance marks the speaker as belonging to a lower class or being poorly educated or being black or being countrified.

D. In catch phrases of advertisements and political slogans:

"You ain't seen nothin' until you have seen"

-Television ad. 16 Feb, 1980

Reagan...continued to use the line he had used when he kicked off his campaign on Labor Day:

" You ain't seen nothin' yet..."

--Elizabeth Drew, New Yorker 3 Dec., 1984

E. In the lyrics of popular songs: The lines of songs, like "It ain't necessarily so," "The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be," and so forth have kept *ain't* alive. As it is monosyllabic, it is clearly heard and more easily enunciated than *isn't*.

F. In tag question "*ain't I?*" As we have seen above, Fowler (1965) regretted that "*ain't I?*" is considered indicative of low breeding, William Safire in New York Times, 23 May, 1982 states "Only in the first person negative interrogative of the verb "to be" is the contraction acceptable in standard speech. Even Bernstein (1977) admits the utility of the tag:

"There can be no doubt that '*ain't I?*' is easier to say than '*aren't I?*' or '*amn't I?*' and sounds less stilted than '*am I not?*'

G. In inverted expressions, such as questions:

"Ain't I a beast for not answering you before?"

- Alfred Lord Tennyson, Letter (in Jesperson)

H. In facetious or jocular or humorous statements. Many educated people use '*ain't*' in such a way as to show that it is not their serious day to day vocabulary but they use it to create humor. For example,

"We like to make jokes, for instance, about the language of tax forms. Heh, heh, we chuckle, *ain't* them bureaucrats a caution?"

-Mitchell 1979

The discussion so far has shown that '*ain't*' is a stigmatized word in general use. Its use by a speaker or a writer makes him/her socially and educationally inferior. But it is still in use as it is considered tolerably respectable. It is a fact that if need persists, the word will stay, and its use to fulfill the purposes enlisted above shows its need. For this reason even the people of upper class and middle class use it in many places among themselves, though they totally suppress it in front of others. Besides, its alternatives are unsatisfactory in one way or another. At least in the tag question '*ain't I?*', many grammarians consider its use right. Therefore, it is being used against the proscription. Though the prescriptive rules proscribe its use, it is gaining ground in the society and is on its way to full acceptance. An anecdote from Reader's Digest shows how the prescriptive rule is defied:

"It had been a stimulating convention, and all the way to the airport the three educators talked about verbal fluency, sentence combining, and student responses to literature. As one of them paid for the ride, the driver peered at him curiously "What are you guys?", he inquired, "English teachers?" Assured that they were, he leaned out the window and shouted, 'Ain't, ain't, ain't I"

Conclusion

'*Ain't*' came in use as a correct grammatical form, but later became stigmatized. Its use is not prestigious today, although it is being used to fulfill various purposes. The generalization of this fact about '*ain't*' may help us deduce that a language varies with place and time and the same linguistic usage could be standard informal for one social group at a time but nonstandard formal for another social group and in some different period of time.

The derivation of '*ain't*' from 'am not' or 'are not' shows phonological variation, which again is the result of the social changes and interaction among different dialects of the same language or different languages of

the interacting communities. ESL teachers and learners should, therefore, be aware of the changes taking place in the society in order to be able to say why there is the conflict between the established rules and new usage and what rules should be made and taught on the basis of present objective facts. The attitude is well-expressed by Robert C. Pooley (1946):

Good English is that form of speech which is appropriate to the purpose of the speaker, true to the language as it is, and comfortable to the speaker and listener. It is the product of custom, neither cramped by rule nor freed from all restraint; it is never fixed but changes with the organic life of the language.

Endnotes

- 1 In *Words on Words: A dictionary Written for Writers And Others Who Care about Words* (1980), he argues that the strictly grammatical form of the first person singular present negative interrogative is 'am I not', contracted to 'amn't I'. Speakers shrink from 'am I not' as stuffy, and from 'amn't I' as prissy. So, 'aren't I' has crept into the language.
- 2 A Merriam Webster cites Witherspoon in Webster's Dictionary of English Usage saying, "I will mention the vulgar abbreviations in general, as **ain't**, **can't**, **don't**, **han't**, **shouldn't**, **wouldn't**, **couldn't** &c." Dearborn in his *Columbian Grammar ca11s* the usage of **ain't** "improprieties, commonly called vulgarism"
- 3 In *Modern English Usage* (1926), he says that **a(i)n't** is merely colloquial, and as used for **isn't** is an uneducated blunder and serves no useful purpose. But it is a pity that **a(i)n't** for **am not**, being a natural contraction and supplying a real want, should shock us as though tarred with the same brush. Though '**I'm not**' serves well enough in statements, there is no abbreviation for '**am I not?**'

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