

LANGUAGE

The English language has grown and changed over the centuries. It has also been enriched by words from other languages. For example, when the settlers arrived in Virginia, they had no word for those small grayish-white animals with the naked pink tails. They adopted the Algonquian word Pocahontas used for these strange animals and called them "opossums".

In the DVD Joan Peirce does not speak the same way that we do today. She not only pronounces some of her words differently, but also her grammar is sometimes the opposite of what is the standard for our time. She may say: "I be" instead of "I am" or "he were" instead of "he was" or even "we was took ill" instead of "we were taken ill". In her time there was no standard for English grammar and people were inconsistent with their usage. Their speech also differs from ours in their choice of words and phrases.

The speech of the past can sometimes be confusing and strange, but, with a little thought and patience, it can be surprisingly easy to understand.

I. Making Sense of Mistress Peirce's Sentences

The sentences below are written as Joan Peirce might say them. Rewrite each of them to make them sound more like proper, modern English.

1. She were but four and ten when she come to the colony.
2. I pray you, allow me to present myself.
3. Will you not step inside and take your ease out of the heat of the sun? We may then have speech in comfort.
4. Many amongst us had fell prey to sickness and disease.
5. He were so bad that he determined to repair to England.

6. Mayhap you are not old enough to remember back thirty year.

7. Methinks there was no time so bad as that winter of 1609—it hath since been called the Winter of the Starving Time.

8. The story caused quite an ado when it were known in England.

9. Aye and that be the rub with our present Governor, Sir John Harvey.

10. We do let rooms in our house in James City. If you have need of lodging, you have but to wait upon me.

II. Modernizing Mistress Peirce's Spelling

Not only was there no standard grammar in Joan's day, but also there was no standard spelling. People spelled words the way they sounded. A word might be spelled one way in one paragraph and another in the next! Write the correct spelling next to the following words:

(Hint: if you are having trouble figuring out what the word is, try sounding it out aloud.)

1. sayle

2. musike

3. anker

4. demaund
5. els
6. gesse
7. thowsand
8. marck
9. prises
10. intertaine

III. What's in a Name?

This “creative spelling” also applied to people’s names. In old documents, Joan’s last name “Peirce” is spelled: Pierce, Peirce, Perce, Peerce, Pearse and Pearce. Sometimes an author mistakes a name’s first letter. For example, one 17th-century writer mistook a “K” sound for a “T” sound and spelled “Kendle” “Tindle”. This can make life difficult for the historian or the genealogist.

Write your full name below, then use 17th century “creative spelling” to respell it at least six different ways.

IV. Mysterious Language

Sometimes, no matter how hard we try, we cannot determine exactly what people in the past meant by a certain word. Sir Francis Wyatt said he thought women survived the conditions in Virginia better than the men because they “were of a cold temper”. We don’t know what he meant by the word “temper”. Does he mean temperament (disposition or nature) or does he mean temperature?

If a woman had a personality that kept her from getting upset about things, how could that help her better survive in a stressful place like early 17th century Jamestown?

If you asked a woman if she felt too hot on an August day and she said, "Oh, no, the heat never bothers me," how could that help her better survive in the climate of Virginia?

V. Punctuation Problems

In the 17th century there was no set standard for punctuation. The following passage by Captain John Smith is all one long sentence!

Mistress Pearce, an honest industrious woman, hath beene there (Virginia) neere twentie yeares, and now returned, saith, shee hath a Garden at James towne, containing three or four acres, where in one yeare shee hath gathered neere an hundred bushels of excellent figges; and that of her owne provision she can keepe a better house in Virginia, than here in London for 3 or 400 pounds a yeare, yet went thither with little or nothing. (John Smith *True Travels Volume III*)

Here are some excerpts from primary sources to study. The spelling has been modernized in some cases. Definitions of some of the more unusual words are in black and in brackets { }

From a letter written by Gabriel Archer from Jamestown, 31 August 1609. (Archer was on board *Blessing* along with Joan Peirce and her daughter.)

"From Woolwich, the fifteenth of May, 1609, seventh sail weighed anchor and came up to Plymouth the twentieth day, where Sir George Somers with two small vessels consorted {met up} with us. Here we took into the *Blessing* (being the ship wherein I went) six mares and two horses; and the fleet laid in some necessities belonging to the action, in which business we spent time till the second of June. And then we set sail to sea, but cross'd by southwest winds we put into Falmouth, and there staying till the eight of June, we then gat out...

We ran a southerly course from the Tropic of Cancer where, having the sun within six or seven degrees right over our head in July, we bore away west, so that by the fervent heat and looms {light} breezes many of our men fell sick of the calenture {possibly heat stroke}, and out of two ships was thrown overboard thirty-two persons. The vice-admiral {the ship on which

the vice-admiral sailed—the *Diamond* was said to have the plague in her; but in the *Blessing* we had not any sick, albeit we had twenty women and children.”

From *Observations gathered out of a discourse of the plantation of the southern colony in Virginia by the English, 1606. Written by that honorable gentleman, Master George Percy.*

“The fifteenth day of June, we had built and finished our fort, which was triangle-wise, having three bulwarks at every corner like a half moon, and four or five pieces of artillery mounted in them; we had made ourselves sufficiently strong for these savages. We had also sown most of our corn {small grains such as barley and oats} on two mountains {mounds}; it sprang a man’s height from the ground. This country is a fruitful soil, bearing many goodly and fruitful trees, as mulberries, cherries, walnuts, cedars, cypress, sassafras, and vines in great abundance.”

Later in his narrative, Percy goes on to describe the first summer at Jamestown:

“Our men were destroyed with cruel diseases, as swellings, fluxes {severe diarrhea}, burning fevers, and by wars, and some departed suddenly, but for the most part they died of mere famine. There were never Englishmen left in a foreign country in such misery as we were in this new-discovered Virginia...Our food was but a small can of barley sod {soaked} in water to five men a day; our drink cold water taken out of the river, which was at a flood very salt, at a low tide full of slime and filth, which was the destruction of many of our men.”

Excerpt from a letter written by Sir George Somers with some of the old spelling intact. (Sir George Somers was the Admiral of the fleet of nine ships that made up the “third supply” that sailed to Virginia in June 1609. He was aboard *Sea Venture*.)

Letter to Lord Salisbury, 15 June 1610

“Right Honorable—May it please your good honor to be advertised that sithence {since} our departure out of England in going to Virginia, about some 100 leagues from the Bermooda we were taken with a very great storm, or hurricane, which sund’red {scattered} all the fleet, and on St. James’ eve, being the 23 of July, we had such a leak in our ship, insomuch that there was in her 9 feet of water before we knew of anything. We pumped with ii {two} pumps and bailed in ii {two} or iii {three} hour places with certain barricoes {barricades?}, and then we kept 100 men always working night and day from the 23 of until the 28 of the same July, being Friday; as which time we saw the Island of Bermooda, where our ship lieth upon a rock a quarter of a mile distant from the shore, where we saved all our lives and afterwards saved much of our goods, but all our bread was wet and lost.”

From Henry Spelman's *Relation of Virginia*. (Spelman was a young English teenager placed by John Smith to live among the Virginia Indians to learn their language and observe their customs. He lived with the Indians for two years and spoke their language fluently.)

How they name their children

“*AFTER THE MOTHER* is delivered of her child, within some few days after, the kinsfolk and neighbors, being entreated thereunto {asked to do so}, comes unto the house where, being assembled, the father takes the child in his arms and declares that {what} his name shall be. As he then calls him, so his name is. Which done, the rest of the day is spent in feasting and dancing.”

Of their towns and buildings

PLACES OF HABITATION they have but few, for the greatest town have not above 20 or 30 houses in it. Their building are made like an oven with a little hole to come in at, but more spacious within, having a hole in the midst of the house for smoke to go out at. The king's houses are both broader and longer than the rest, having many dark windings and turnings before any come where the king is. But in that time when they go a-hunting, the women goes to a place appointed before to build houses for their husbands to lie in at night, carrying mats with them to cover their houses withal.”

The pastimes

WHEN THEY MEET at feasts or otherwise, they use sports much like to ours here in England, as their dancing, which is like our Derbyshire hornpipe {a lively country dance}: a man first and then a woman, and so through them all, hanging all in a round. There is one which stand in the midst with a pipe and a rattle with which, when he begins to make a noise all the rest jiggets {jig; dance in a quick, lively way} about, wrying {twisting, bending} their necks and stamping on the ground.

They use, beside, football play, which women and young boys do much play at, the men never. They make their goals as ours, only they never fight nor pull one another down.

The men play with a little ball, letting it fall out of their hand, and striketh it with the top of his foot. And he that can strike the ball furthest wins, that they play for.”

Excerpt from the *Minutes of the General Court 1622 - 1632*. (On the 9th of May 1625 Dr. Pott sued Mistress Blaney for slander. Mistress Blaney claimed that Doctor Pott had caused her to have a miscarriage by refusing to give her a piece of hog flesh. The following excerpt includes Joan Peirce's testimony and the verdict. The spelling and punctuation are original to the document.)

“Mrs. Joane Peerce sworne and Examined sayeth that Mrs. Blany cam to her house, requestinge her to send to Doctor Potts in her owne name for A peece of hogs fflesh Mrs. Blayny sayinge that she had spoken to Doctor Pott for A peece, but was denyed it, And that after Mrs. Blayny had miscarried, but the time she knoweth not, nor whether it were the occasione.

It is the opinion of the Courte that it is no slander that Mrs. Blany Chargethe Doctor Pott with denying her a peece of fflesh, whereuppon shee miscarried, because she hath taken her oath that she thinketh in her Conscyenc that it was the occasion of her miscaryinge, but it no way appereth, and it is barbarows to Imagine, that he had any conceipt she had A longing to it but thought it was spent{given away} by his wiefe.”