

# American English: A Diverse Tongue

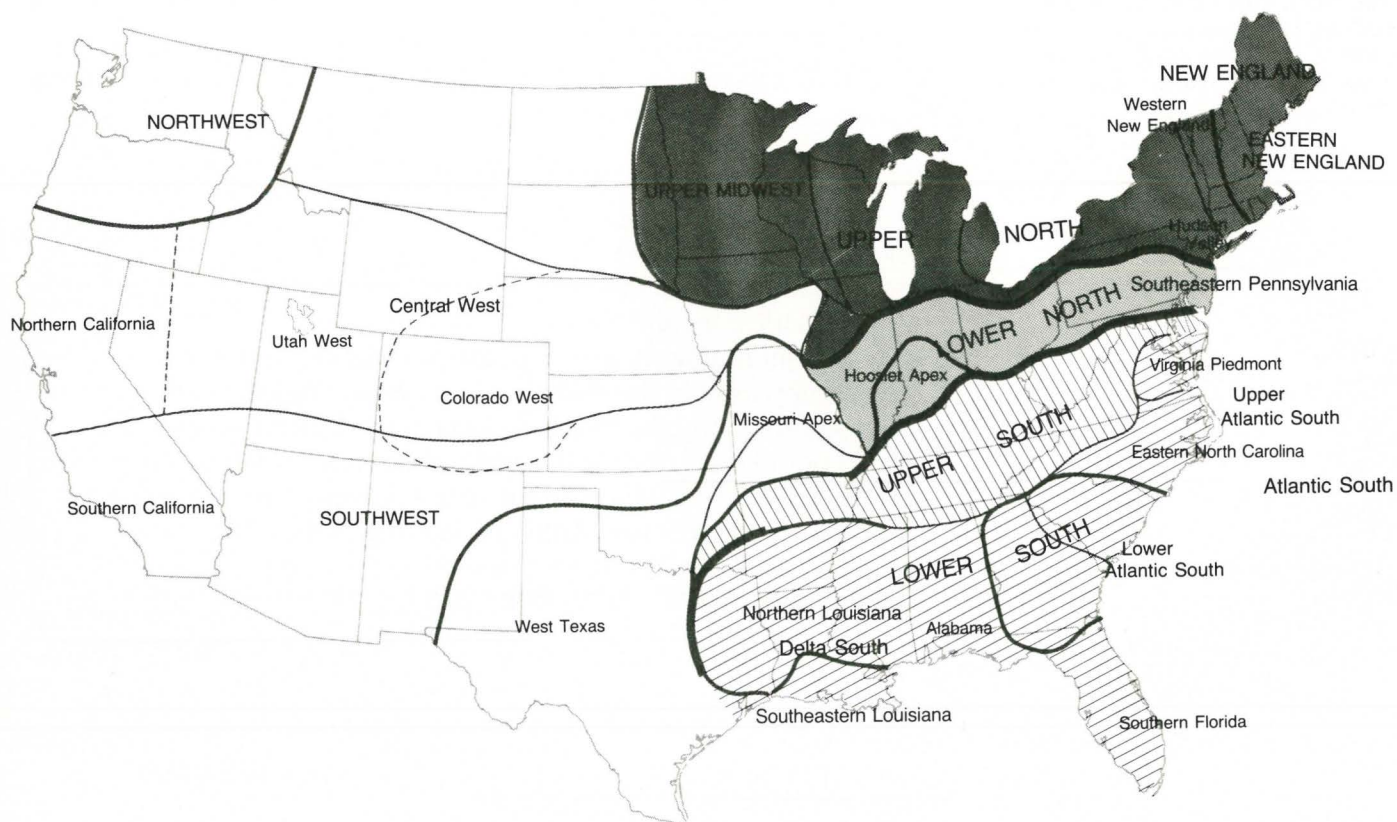
by Walt Wolfram

It takes little linguistic sophistication to recognize that American English comes in a variety of forms. A native resident of northern Michigan traveling south to New Orleans cannot help but notice the patchwork of dialect differences along the way, while the native of New Orleans traveling north experiences a mirror image of these observations. Dialect variation in the United States is hardly a recent phenomenon, for as long as English has been spoken in the New World, dialect differences have been noted. During the earliest periods the difference between the English spoken in the colonies and that spoken in England was the main focus of attention. The developing features distinguished American from British English, becoming a symbolic token of emerging independence. With the security of national independence, the different strands of American English itself were freed to represent the blossoming cultural and regional traditions within the United States.

Why is it that American English has become such a diverse tongue and that this variation persists in the face of strong institutional pressures to level these differences? The answer is at once simple and complex as historical, cultural, physical, and linguistic factors intersect in different configurations to demark the dialectal lines that run across the United States.

*Walt Wolfram is a professor of Communication Arts and Sciences at the University of the District of Columbia and Director of Research at the Center for Applied Linguistics. Over the past two decades Dr. Wolfram has conducted research and written numerous books and articles on the major regional and ethnic dialects of American English, including Appalachian English, Ozark English, Vernacular Black English, Puerto Rican English, American Indian (Puebloan) English, and, most recently, Vietnamese English*

The major dialect regions of the United States summarized. From *American Regional Dialects: A World Geography* by Craig M. Carver. ©1987 by the University of Michigan. Courtesy The University of Michigan Press







Raconteur Alex Kellam (standing) in Tom's Grocery, Ewell, Smith Island, Maryland, 1977.  
Photo by Carl Fleischhauer, courtesy American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

By world standards of language life, English in the United States is not old, so that the influence of original settlement patterns is still apparent. Of course, English in America never was a homogeneous variety as early settlers brought different varieties of the language from different regions of England to begin with, and these dialects helped set the stage for continuing variation.

The patterns of English spread westward from cultural centers on the coast. Five early centers were instrumental in establishing this original linguistic divergence: Boston, Philadelphia, Tidewater Virginia, Charleston, and New Orleans. These original centers, and the subsequent migratory routes of the population from these points, are still apparent in the dialects of American English as shown in the map summarizing the major dialects in the United States. For the Anglo population most of the major dialect boundaries run an east-to-west route, following the major routes of migration taken by this population. For non-Anglo groups the dialectal boundaries run a different course. The Black population, located predominantly in the South originally, shows dialectal lines following a south-to-north migratory route. The influence of southern coastal Black varieties from the Carolinas is still apparent in the Black population in eastern urban areas such as Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and New York City, and the influence of the deep South dialects is found in the Black population of northern industrial cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland.





Certain language traits are common to rural Black English and Appalachian English, but other features differentiate them. A grocery, Stem, North Carolina, 1940. Photo by Jack Delano, courtesy Library of Congress

The reasons for settlement and migratory movement naturally reflect deeper cultural trends, molded both by the group itself and its contact history with other groups. The first settlers in New England, for example, came primarily from eastern and southern rural England, bringing with them farming and fishing expressions that have distinguished New England speech to the present. On the other hand, early movement to Rhode Island was motivated by the search for a religious refuge from New England in much the same way that New England itself was England's refuge, and the dialects of Rhode Island today therefore reflect similarities and differences with other New England groups. The story of each regional and cultural group is different, but in each case its dialect can be traced to an array of cultural and historical factors that shaped settlement and migration.

The paths of dialect patterning across the United States have also been molded by a topography that determined where people went and how they got there. Important rivers such as the Ohio and Mississippi played a significant part in the establishment of American English dialects as pioneers established inland networks of commerce and communication. We are therefore not surprised to find a major dialect route in America running in tandem with the course of the Ohio River. Furthermore, terrain which naturally isolates groups typically plays an important role in defining abrupt dialect divisions. Thus, a distinctive localized English variety was



fostered in Tangier and Smith Islands, off the coast of Maryland, where small fishing communities were cut off from the mainland. And, on the Sea Islands, off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, physical isolation combined with social isolation to maintain an historical Creole language among Black residents which still sounds more like the Caribbean Creoles than the mainland dialects of English.

One of the most prominent vernacular dialects of English flourished in the historically isolated southern Appalachian mountain range. Along with a vocabulary replete with distinctions relevant to the indigenous ways of the area, a number of older English forms can be found in this dialect, such as the pronunciation of *it* as *bit* or the use of the prefix *a-* as in *They went a-huntin' and a-fishin'*. These forms have sometimes led language romantics to claim that pure Elizabethan English is retained in this region. While older, "relic" forms can be found, our language is always changing, and the dynamic processes of language typically combine something old with something new in the development of a dialect. Speakers with rural, agriculturally-based lifestyles have traditionally resisted some of the changes associated with linguistic urbanization. Their tenacity in holding on to certain older ways of speaking, however, is juxtaposed with the continuing, independent development of the dialect.

Along the paths of resettlement and migration, contact with other language groups takes place, and these contacts contribute in essential ways to the definition of dialect as well. These influences have contributed to the general nature of American English as well as regional dialects where contact is more intensive and localized. In the 17th century words like *moccasin*, *raccoon*, and *chipmunk* were incorporated from the primary influence of American Indian languages, whereas French in the 18th century gave us words like *bureau*, *depot*, and *prairie*. German contributed *delicatessen*, *kindergarten*, and *hamburger* to the general lexicon of American English while Spanish gave it *canyon*, *rodeo*, and *patio*. Regionally, French gave New Orleans *lagniappe*, a small present; German gave southwest Pennsylvania *stollen*, a kind of cake; and Spanish gave the Southwest *arroyo*, a kind of gully. Features of traditional ritual, cuisine, and topography, so integrally woven into the definition of cultural regions, are often among the most sensitive barometers of dialect differences in lexicon, but more subtle influences are found in pronunciation and grammatical patterns as well.

Although much historical interest in American English dialects has focused on regional variation, these areal and cultural distinctions invariably intersect with social differentiation within the community itself, whether it is a southern rural area or a large northern metropolitan one. In fact, it is difficult to talk about regional dialect differences in English without qualifying these in terms of socioeconomic differences, and the failure to make these qualifications often leads to unjustified stereotyping.

Social dialects are, of course, just another behavioral manifestation of status differences within a community. *Pygmalion* has rightly taught us that language may be considerably more significant than other, more superficial manifestations of cultural differences, but

there is also a more subtle message to be understood: dialect symbolically represents positive attributes of community life and social identity. The values of group solidarity and community identity may actually provide quite strong reinforcement for the maintenance of different dialects. From this perspective the rejection of a local dialect may be interpreted as a rejection of the heritage of the group itself, and there are countless stories of people who couldn't return home comfortably without making symbolic readjustments back to their native dialect.

The media explosion of the past half century and the increasingly accessible geography of the United States have caused some language forecasters to predict that present-day dialect differences will soon go the way of the horse and buggy. Certainly, some leveling has taken place over the past fifty years, and people of different regional and social backgrounds may now be more familiar with other dialect groups than they once were. But those who understand the symbolic significance of dialects are unfazed by such premature predictions of dialect death. Language diversity is so intrinsically tied in with cultural and ethnic diversity that the persistence of dialects is guaranteed through the maintenance of diverse cultures and lifestyles. In fact, dialects, the soul of language, can be counted on to outlast many more superficial manifestations of culture.

#### *Suggested reading*

*American Speech: A Quarterly Journal of Linguistic Usage*. Published by the University of Alabama Press, for the American Dialect Society.

Carver, Craig M. *American Regional Dialects: A Word Geography*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1987.

Cassidy, Frederic G. Ed., *Dictionary of American Regional English, A-C*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985.

Ferguson, Charles and Shirley Brice Heath, eds. *Language in the USA*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

#### *Suggested film*

*American Tongues*, by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker. Center for New American Media, New York.

#### *Suggested videotape*

*The Story of English*, by Robert MacNeil. Public Broadcasting Service.