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Exploring the Role of Scots-Irish English in the Modern Midland Dialect

In a place as vast as the United States, regional dialects are a given. Most of the populace grows up with an inherent recognition that there are people in their country whose speech sounds different from their own. However, these variants in accents, lexicon, and grammar only receive surface-level attentions. They are typically distilled to caricatures and attributed to matters of geography and regional identity without further thought. Many may be surprised to find that American English dialects are the result of an ever-evolving amalgamation of historical influences. Through careful methodology, components of these dialects can be dissected to reveal their roots. In this essay, I will discuss synchronic variation in American English as a result of centuries-old settlement patterns. Specifically, I will be investigating how the variety of English spoken by 18th century Scots-Irish immigrants influenced the Midland dialect of American English. I will explore some phonological and lexical features which still remain, and I will demonstrate how the roots still in place are primarily syntactical and grammatical.

There is certainly a precedent for studying the contemporary ties to historical dialects. As Wolfram and Schilling explain, this is a recognized phenomena called the Founder Effect. Their definition is as follows: “The durable imprint of language structures brought to an area by the earliest groups of people forging a new society in the region” (29). This has also been referred to by linguists as the Principle of First Effective Settlement (Stanford 126). Context, of course, is vital to understanding how and why these features remain in spoken dialects today. In order to understand these historical language structures, we must first examine the people who used them.

The term Scots-Irish – sometimes also referred to as the Scotch-Irish or Ulster Scots – is used to describe a group of emigrants who moved from their native Scotland to a section of Ireland in order to escape religious persecution for their Protestant beliefs (Wolfram and Schilling 104). The region where they lived encompassed parts of modern-day Northern Ireland and Ireland; it was founded in 1609 and known by the name of Ulster (Crozier 310). At a time when mainland Scots' English was becoming more homogenous with London speech, the English spoken by Ulster's inhabitants preserved particular Scottish characteristics (Wolfram and Schilling 104). There was very little Irish influence upon their vernacular, though the mass migration to Ireland undoubtedly colored their culture (Montgomery, "Voices" 342). These immigrants populated Ulster and developed a way of life there for over a century.

After experiencing several years of poor economic prospects, the Scots-Irish began to flee their Ulster refuge in favor of a new migration to the "New World" (Griffin 591-592). In the span of about 50 years, over 250,000 Scots-Irish came to America. By the time America declared independence, the Scots-Irish comprised approximately one-seventh of the colonist population (Wolfram and Schilling 104). While many of them settled in the southern half of Pennsylvania, others fanned out from their arrivals via the Delaware River to colonize parts of Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia (Crozier 313-315). Notably, this encompasses the contemporary dialect area known as the Midland range (Wolfram and Schilling 109). This significant population distribution, coupled with the unique dialect specific to this region, has prompted leagues of researchers to untangle the linguistic complexities hidden in its history.

One of the most distinct features of the Midland range is actually only anomalous when viewed in conjunction with its neighboring dialect areas. Two of the earliest enduring English settlements, Jamestown and Boston, were primarily inhabited by colonists from London and its surrounding locale. In the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, English spoken in Southeast England was undergoing a change from their once *r*-ful speech to take on a feature known as the postvocalic *r*. This caused any [ɹ] sound following a vowel and preceding a consonant to instead become an [ɑ] sound (Wolfram and Schilling 98-100), and it can still be heard in parts of the South and Eastern New England today (Crozier 327). However, the areas which the Scots-Irish most heavily occupied ran between these Southeastern English-speaking strongholds. The Scots-Irish wielded an insular and staunchly *r*-ful speech. Not only did they retain their [ɹ], but they also influenced the German immigrants in Pennsylvania to acquire their phonology (Montgomery, "Voices" 343). This helped strengthen the endurance of *r*-ful Midland speech.

The Scots-Irish dialect has been hypothesized as the cause of several other phonological features of the Midland, although the burden of proving this attribution presents a challenge. In an ambitious research project, Dr. Michael Montgomery isolated characteristics of Scots-Irish written correspondence which most likely produced a replication of the writers' informal speech ("Voices" 347). In doing so, he discovered significant vowel merging in pairs such as *meat/mate* and *pen/pin* (Montgomery, "Voices" 348, 351). Other linguists have even suggested that one of the most discussed vowel mergers in American English, where *caught* and *cot* sound the same, is

also a result of Scots-Irish influences (Lass 273). Each of these examples can still be observed in the Midland dialect region today.

Dr. Montgomery has also proposed that one of the trademark phrases of Southern speech, the second-person plural pronoun *y'all*, spread downwards from the Scots-Irish Midland. The Scottish tendency to produce a vowel-fronted *ye* rather than *you* paired with usage of vocalized /l/ would result in the phrase "you all" sounding more like "y'aw". While these phonological features are not specific to the Ulster Scots-Irish, the correlation between the distribution of these particular immigrants and the appearance of the word *y'all* certainly points to their influence (Montgomery, "Voices" 345-346). Contact with other dialects may have resisted the vocalized /l/ while retaining the fronted vowel in *you*, culminating in the Southern signature *y'all*.

The Scots-Irish also made phonological and lexical contributions along the northern border of the Midland dialect region. Many place names in Pennsylvania are directly borrowed from Ulster counties, and they are in close proximity to early German settlements. These immigrant neighbors adopted into their own Pennsylvania German words such as "*chaw* for *chew*, *ingine* for *engine*, [and] *picter* for *picture*" (Crozier 312, 317). The Germans' idiosyncratic pronunciations of non-German lexical items point to the Scots-Irish influence. Their lexical impact was especially strong in their primary settlements in Pennsylvania, where several other Ulster-specific terms are still in colloquial use today (Montgomery, "Voices" 354). Some of the lexicon of the Scots-Irish, however, is unique in its usage rather than its inherent meaning.

Dr. Montgomery asserts that the true depth of the Scots-Irish influence is often concealed in grammatical structures. He writes:

> Vocabulary is less stable between and within generations and can change, disappear, or spread more rapidly. Grammar is 'deeper', normally more resistant to change, at least rapid change, and is usually based on rules unconsciously acquired . . . Systemic application of [grammar] indicates that Ulster-Scots/ Scotch-Irish input is one of the most important Old World influences on the development of American regional dialects. ("Solving" 316).

An excellent example to illustrate Dr. Montgomery's point exists in one of the most distinctive grammatical features of the Midland region. Speakers often pair the words *need, want,* or *like* with a prepositional adverb (Benson 246). Where other dialect regions would fill the gap with an infinitive verb, it is perfectly acceptable in Midland speech to omit it. This results in sentences like, "We need in," rather than, "We need to get in." Interestingly, examples of both *want* and *like* plus a prepositional adverb have been proven to be Scots-Irish in origin (Crozier 326), but the pairing of *need* with a prepositional adverb is noticeably absent from their initial grammatical constructions. Thus, linguistic researchers have proposed that the Scots-Irish laid a grammatical framework upon which *need* could be automatically applied (Benson 245-246). While this represents a grammatical innovation as a result of the Scots-Irish, it should also be noted that they retained and brought over archaic English grammatical features that may have been lost without their Ireland migration.

One grammatical holdover that the Scots-Irish have been hypothesized to have brought to the Midland dialect is the use of the Northern Concord Rule, also known as the Northern Subject Rule. This states that "verbs with third-person plural noun subjects are marked with *-s*, but those

with an adjacent pronoun subject are not" (Montgomery, "Voices" 346). This produces constructions like *dogs barks* or *kids plays* while contrasting with the pronoun forms *they bark* or *they play*. This rule is not particular to Scots-Irish English; Northern England colonists of the same time would likely have exhibited the same patterning. This shared trait likely contributed to "a mutual reinforcement" of the rule within the Midland dialect (McCafferty 132). Scots-Irish English did exhibit other unique elements of concord, which will further be discussed below.

Negative sentences in Scots-Irish English seem to produce the most unique grammatical and syntactical rules. Evidence from primary sources shows that Scots-Irish English followed negative concord, defined as "the use of two negatives where standard English requires only one" (Smith 130). Double negation was standard in Old and Middle English, but its usage began to decline around the same time that the Scots emigrated to Ulster. As a result, it has been proposed that this quality retained in Scots-Irish speech is responsible for its present-day proliferation in the Midland dialect, where it has also spread to Southern dialects and African American English sociolects (Smith 112, 126). Primary Scots-Irish sources additionally suggest a predecessor to a specific area of the modern Midland dialect which uses *was* for affirmative sentences and *were* for negatory sentences (Montgomery, "Voices" 350). On the other hand, the Scots-Irish had a tendency to use *anymore* in positive constructions, whereas Standard English usage typically precludes its utilization outside of negatory or subjunctive contexts. These positive *anymore* situations can still be observed in the Midland range, especially in Appalachia (Wolfram and Schilling 29). Clearly, the complex grammatical and syntactical architecture of Scots-Irish English still lays beneath the surface of negation rules in the Midland dialect.

The tenacity of the Founder Effect is widespread and evident through the links between modern American English in the Midland region and the English spoken by its Scots-Irish settlers. Their lexicon and phonology remains, though each softened and isolated as a result of time and contact with other settlers. However, their strongest linguistic tools – grammar and syntax – are still deeply ingrained within the Midland range. Tracing the synchronic variation of American English is no simple task, but the methodical isolation and extrapolation of these features reveals a history as broad and diverse as the country itself.

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