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2

Why Dialects?

Most people find dialects intriguing. At the same time, they have lots of questions and often have strong opinions about them as well. Probably the most common question we encounter about the status of American English dialects, especially from journalists, is, "Don't you think dialects are dying, due to television, social media, and the increasing mobility of the American population?" Certainly, advances in transportation and media technology have radically compressed the geography of the United States and opened up new venues of communication in recent decades. But the fact of the matter is that American dialects are hardly endangered. Indeed, there is good evidence that some types of dialect differences are actually intensifying rather than receding, and it is difficult to imagine the English language without its rich array of dialects.

But why are there so many dialects in the first place? What are the factors that lead to language differences, and why does dialect diversity persist in the face of mass communication, increased mobility, and seeming cultural homogenization? Both social and linguistic factors are involved in the answer to these questions. Socially, we look to the same types of factors that account for general regional and behavioral differences among people, whether these differences are in style of dress, architecture, or other cultural traits. Linguistically, we look to the way we produce and perceive language as well as how individual language features are organized into coherent systems. These linguistic and social factors combine in countless ways, resulting in a wide variety of language variation. In the following sections, we examine some of the historical, social, and linguistic considerations that help explain the development of dialect variation.

Link 2.1: Visit http://americanenglishwiley.com/ to watch linguist John McWhorter present a TED talk on the language of texting.

American English: Dialects and Variation, Third Edition. Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling.

2.1 Sociohistorical Explanation

At the same time that language operates as a highly structured communicative code, it also functions as a kind of cultural behavior. It is only natural, then, that social differentiation of various types should go hand in hand with language differences. In the following sections, we discuss some of the primary social, cultural, and psychological factors that set the stage for language variation and dialect differentiation.

2.1.1 Settlement

One of the most obvious explanations for language variation is rooted in the settlement patterns of groups of speakers. The history of American English does not begin with the initial arrival of English speakers in the Americas. Some of the dominant characteristics can be traced to dialect differences that existed in the British Isles before the British colonization of America. Others can be traced to varieties that arose in language contact situations in areas such as the Caribbean and the west coast of Africa. The earliest English-speaking inhabitants came from different parts of the British Isles, where dialects were already in place. Many emigrants from Southeastern England originally established themselves in Eastern New England and Tidewater Virginia. Others, from northern and western parts of England, situated themselves in the New Jersey and Delaware area. In addition, emigrants of "Scots-Irish," or "Scotch-Irish" descent from Ulster, Northern Ireland, set up residence in Western New England, upper New York, and many parts of Appalachia. (Note that the terms "Scots-Irish" and "Scotch-Irish" are used somewhat synonymously in the United States, but the latter term tends to be dismissed in the United Kingdom today with the quip, "Scotch is a drink, Scots are a people." Though Scotch-Irish is the older term (Wolfram and Reaser 2014: 34–45), we use the newer term "Scots-Irish" in this book because it currently seems to be the more neutral term.) From these points, the population fanned westward in a way that is still reflected in the dialect configuration of the United States today. The major dialects of American English were focused around population centers established by emigrants, such as Boston, Philadelphia, Richmond, and Charleston. We discuss the history of English settlement in the United States in more detail in Chapter 4. For now, if you look ahead to the map in Figure 4.2, you can see how the configuration of dialects of the Eastern United States still reflects the distribution of early British habitation in the New World.

Link 2.2: Visit http://americanenglishwiley.com/ to see sociolinguist William Labov discussing the lasting effects of early English-speaking settlement patterns on American dialect divisions.

Settlement generally takes place in several distinct phases. In the initial phase, a group of people moves to an area where there are appealing or convenient environmental qualities and promising economic opportunities, bringing the culture of their origin.

In the next phase, land is occupied, and a new cultural identity emerges, as a cohesive society develops in the region. The creation of this new culture is often accompanied by the elimination or incorporation of existing cultures and ways of speaking. For example, in the process of forging an "American" culture out of various European cultures, colonists overwhelmed numerous Native American Indian cultures – and languages. Today, there exist very few American Indian languages, and numbers of speakers are continually dwindling. This is not to say that Native American languages played no part in the development of American English dialects; but the Native American languages that the original European emigrants encountered when they first arrived in North America were almost completely supplanted by varieties of English, as well as other European languages.

In the third phase of settlement, regional populations define roles for themselves with respect to wider social groupings. How communities situate themselves with respect to national commerce and culture becomes an important part of the definition of localized populations, as they maintain and adjust aspects of their language varieties in shaping distinctive identities.

The forerunners of the dominant cultural group in a given region typically establish cultural and linguistic boundaries that persist in time, although the original features that characterize each area may change in a number of ways. Much has changed in English over the centuries of its existence in North America, but the initial patterns of habitation by English speakers from various parts of the British Isles, as well as by emigrants and enslaved peoples who spoke languages other than English, are still reflected in the patterning of dialect differentiation in the United States today. The durable imprint of language structures brought to an area by the earliest groups of people forging a new society in the region is referred to as the FOUNDER EFFECT. For example, the use of an *-s* ending on verbs with plural subjects, as in *The dogs barks*, in varieties of Southern Appalachian speech today, is probably attributable to a founder effect from the English variety of the Ulster Scots as well as Northern England, as is the use of *anymore* in positive sentences such as *we watch a lot of Netflix anymore*. Though it is sometimes difficult to identify founder effects centuries after the establishment of a new settlement in a region, there is little doubt that the earliest peoples in new settlements can have a lasting effect on the language legacy of a region.

2.1.2 Migration

Once primary population centers are established, dialect boundaries will often follow the major migratory routes from those areas. The dividing lines between the traditional dialects of American English reflect both original colonization and migratory flow (again, see Figure 4.2). It is no accident that many of the dialect boundaries of American English still show an east–west fanning pattern, since this was the pattern of westward migration from the earliest points of English-speaking settlement along the east coast. For example, a major dialect boundary runs across the state of Pennsylvania, separating

the so-called North from Midland dialect. Traditional vocabulary differences such as the use of *pail* versus *bucket, teeter-totter* versus *seesaw*, and the pronunciation of *crick* versus *creek* for a "small stream of running water" are divided by the line. In the trough of the northern boundary through Pennsylvania and the southern boundary running through Delaware and Maryland a major early migration route existed. The high-density east–west flow of early colonizers in the North and Midland regions is still reflected in major interstate highway routes that run through the area – and in dialect lines that continue westward from the early east coast settlements.

The primary east–west migratory pattern reflects the movement of speakers of European descent, but other groups show different patterns. African American migratory patterns, for example, have been primarily south to north, emanating from different points in the rural South. African American speakers from South Carolina and North Carolina migrated northward along a coastal route into Washington, DC, Philadelphia, and New York. The migratory route of inland African Americans from the Deep South, on the other hand, led into Midwestern areas such as St Louis, Chicago, and Detroit. The vernacular dialects of eastern coastal cities such as Washington, DC, versus those of Midwestern cities such as Chicago still reflect some differences attributable to these different paths of migration, cutting across the east–west routes that typified European American migration. In recent decades, some newer migration patterns have arisen. For example, non-Southerners have been moving into Southern cities as Northern industries move there. In addition, many Northern African Americans are returning to their cultural and family roots and moving southward as well. These movement patterns are bound to have some effect on Southern dialect varieties. However, the South-North dialect divide is persisting and seems likely to be maintained. Historic and current westward migration patterns are presented in more detail in Chapter 4.

2.1.3 Geographical factors

Geography often plays a role in the development of dialects, not because of topography *per se*, but because rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys, and other features of the terrain determine the routes that people take and where they settle. Major rivers such as the Ohio and Mississippi played an important role in the development of American English dialects, as the British and other Europeans established inland networks of commerce and communication. It is thus not surprising that a major boundary runs along the course of the Ohio River. On the other hand, the Mississippi River, running a north–south route, deflected the westward migration of Midland populations northward, creating a discontinuous boundary between the Northern and Midland dialect areas which is still in place to some extent today.

Link 2.3: Visit http://americanenglishwiley.com/ to hear James Barrie Gaskill of Ocracoke Island, North Carolina, talking about how the remote island community and its dialect historically have been viewed.

Terrain that isolates groups also can play a critical role in the development of dialects. For example, African Americans living in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia and European American residents of the Outer Banks islands in North Carolina historically have been isolated from mainland speakers and their language varieties. In both cases, distinctive varieties of English were fostered in these out-of-the-way island settings. However, the varieties were quite different from one another, because the first non-indigenous inhabitants of each island community spoke very different varieties to begin with. The Outer Banks islands off the North Carolina coast were characterized by the retention of a number of features from earlier versions of English, including such unusual lexical items as *mommuck*, meaning "to harass or bother," and *quamish*, meaning "sick in the stomach." On the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, a language preserving features of original contact between English speakers and speakers of various African languages was perpetuated. This language, known as GULLAH or GEECHEE, historically has been quite different not only from European American varieties but also from mainland varieties of African American English (AAE). Of course, both Gullah and Outer Banks English have also changed over the centuries, but these changes have not always paralleled changes taking place in mainland varieties of American English. Thus, their current distinctiveness is perpetuated by different patterns of change as well as the retention of forms brought to each area in the early days of British colonization and the formation of the United States as an independent nation.

When we talk about geographical boundaries, we are really talking about lines of communication and the fact that discontinuities in communication develop between communities due, in part, to geographical conditions. Even in the age of social media, face-to-face communication still has more of an impact on language variation than electronic communication, and when groups of speakers do not interact on a personal level with one another, the likelihood of dialect divergence is heightened. Combined with various other sociological conditions, natural boundaries provide a firm foundation for the development and maintenance of dialect differences.

2.1.4 Language contact

Contact with speakers of other languages naturally takes place during the course of the establishment of new settlements and this contact can influence language variation. For example, in the seventeenth century, American English was influenced by Native American languages from the Algonquian, Iroquoian, and Siouan language families. Lexical items from various Native American languages made their way into general American English, such as *moccasin, raccoon*, and *chipmunk*. Today, hundreds of regions and towns still bear names derived from Native American Indian languages. In the eighteenth century, American English was influenced by French, which gave the language such words as *bureau, depot*, and *prairie*. German gave American English *delicatessen, kindergarten*, and *hamburger*, while early Spanish contact gave it *canyon, rodeo*, and *patio*. Chinese gave it *tea, ketchup, chopsticks*, while Japanese donated *tycoon, judo,* and *karaoke*,

among other terms. All of these items are now in such widespread use across the varieties of American English that they are no longer considered dialect-specific features.

Link 2.4: Visit http://americanenglishwiley.com/ to see a video of popular British performer and author Stephen Fry talking about the naturalness of language change.

In areas where contact with languages other than English has been intensive and localized, BORROWINGS from these languages often remain restricted to a given dialect. In New Orleans, where French influence historically has been strong, dialect-specific terms such as *lagniappe*, meaning "a small gift or bonus," or *boudin*, meaning "pork sausage," reflect this influence. Interestingly, *lagniappe* itself is a mixture of several borrowings. Originally, it comes from the Quechua (Native American) term *yapa*, which was borrowed into Spanish as *la ñapa* and finally into French as *lagniappe*. Other localized terms include such German words as *stollen*, meaning "a kind of fruit cake," in Southern Pennsylvania and the Spanish term *arroyo*, meaning "a kind of gully," in the Southwest. In many cases, lexical borrowings simply reflect cultural borrowings; thus, English speakers in New Orleans have borrowed a number of terms from Cajun French which pertain to cooking, while Southwestern varieties of English now incorporate a number of lexical items from Spanish which relate to ranching practices.

Exercise 2.1

Following are some words that are borrowed from French, Spanish, and German. For the most part, these words are regionally restricted to areas where extensive contact with native speakers of one of these languages took place. Identify the language that each of the words comes from, as well as the region where you would expect to find the item.

coulee, lariat, serape, schnickelfritz, cuartel, pumpernickel, zwieback, levee, rathskeller, pirogue

Do you know the meanings of all of the above words? Which ones give you the most difficulty? Why?

The impact of language contact on American English is most obvious in terms of vocabulary, but there have been other kinds of influences as well. Certain SUFFIXES have been borrowed from other languages, such as German *-fest* in words like *songfest, slugfest*, and *gabfest*, and the French suffix *-ee*, as in *draftee, enlistee*, and *trainee*. (Note that *-ee* is simply a feminine ending in French, as is *-ette* in both English and French.) In Southeastern Pennsylvania, with its heavy influx of German settlers, the use of the sentence structure *Are you going with*? for *Are you going with me/us*? is most reasonably accounted for by tracing it to the German construction *Gehst du mit*?, literally "Are you going with?" And in the South, the absence of the *be* verb in sentences such as *They in the house* or *We going to the store* among both African Americans and European Americans is most likely due to

the influence of the language variety spoken by peoples of African descent early in the history of the United States. We will discuss in more detail the various contributions of different language groups to the formation of American English in Chapter 4.

Historical patterns of conquest, colonization, migration, and language contact are important factors in the development of language varieties, but they are not the sole considerations. Groups of speakers who share a common background in terms of these factors still manage to differentiate themselves from one another. Economic, sociological, and psychological bases for talking differently have to be recognized along with historical, geographical, and demographic factors.

2.1.5 Economic ecology

How people earn their living often goes hand in hand with how populations are distributed geographically and culturally. In the United States, there is a full complement of ecologically based occupations, including fishing in coastal areas, coal mining in the mountains, and farming in the plains. Different economic bases not only bring about the development of specialized vocabulary items associated with different occupations; they also may affect the direction and rate of language change. The traditional distinction between the rural, agriculturally based lifestyle that historically characterized much of the United States and the urban, industrialized focus of the nation's major population centers is reflected in dialect differences on all levels of language organization.

In American society, metropolitan regions typically have been centers of change, while rural locales have been slower to change. This difference in the speed with which cultural innovations are adopted encompasses linguistic innovations as well. Many older language features, such as the *a-* prefix in *She was a-hunting and a-fishing* or the *h* in *Hit's nice out today*, are now retained only in rural areas. If dialectologists want to observe whether an older form of English is still in use in a particular area, they will typically seek out older, life-time residents of rural areas; and if they want to see if a recent language change has been adopted, they will seek out younger speakers from metropolitan or suburban areas. Originally, urban–rural distinctions in this country had a strong economic base. Today, however, these distinctions carry a host of social and cultural meanings besides particular ways of making a living, all of which may be conveyed by the different language varieties. And in some areas of the South, for example, it may be the case that the urban–rural distinction is one of the strongest factors correlating with language differences (Wolfram and Reaser 2014). On the other hand, some language changes may originate in rural areas if the social meanings attached to rural forms become important to people in urban and suburban areas. Rural language features are often associated with a long-established heritage in a given area, and such associations may become important if a formerly isolated area is suddenly faced with an influx of outsiders. For example, as we shall see in Chapter 5, the rural Southern form *fixin' to*, as in *She's fixin' to go to church now*, has recently spread from rural to urban areas in Oklahoma and Texas in the face of mass migrations into the state by non-Southerners.