ARE ACCENTS OUT?; Hey, Dude, Like NEH-oh Way!

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

LEAD: I HAVE NEVER MUCH LIKED THE WAY I TALK. IN UPSTATE New York, where I was raised, people said things like "Lemme have a HEE-am SEEN-wich" and "You scared the BEE-JEES-us outa me." It had no grace. Nowhere in our local speech was there the hint of a drawl, or any majestic New England tones, or even a trace of downstate Brooklynese - which can sound almost poetic if you are in the right mood.

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If American mobility and televison have conspired to dilute regional accents, as language critics have been insisting for most of this century, word never reached my old hometown. Nor, according to linguists of the American Dialect Society, have accents been much corrupted anywhere else. We are not all beginning to sound the same -despite what some people believe.

A couple of years ago, the novelist Thomas Williams wrote that "in the last 30 years I've seen the very speech of

my own state, New Hampshire, change gradually toward something like Middle Western standard, as though the last generation learned as much of its tongue from Captain Kangaroo and Johnny Carson as it did from its parents and grandparents." That's probably easy enough to believe these days. The nation is seemingly becoming more homogenized, and if a Big Mac tastes the same in Hollywood, Fla., as it does in Hollywood, Calif., it is not unreasonable to presume that we all sound like Ronald McDonald.

But consider this: A few years ago a cargo handler for Pan-American World Airways named Paul Prinzivalli was suspected of having phoned in bomb threats to the airline's offices in Los Angeles. The charge was based on tapes made of the caller, who, officials thought, had a heavy East Coast accent similar to Prinzivalli's. It wasn't until William Labov, a linguist at the University of Pennsylvania, testified that the caller had a Boston accent -and Prinzivalli had a metropolitan New York accent -that the charges were dropped. "I had to fly out there," says Labov, who has spent nearly 30 years listening to gibbering Americans from coastal Massachusetts to the bone-dry Southwest, "and explain to a room full of Californians that not everybody on the East Coast sounds the same."

The truth is, say linguists, that various regions of the country are sounding increasingly different from one another. Yes, certain words have vanished - seldom do you hear a worm called a john-jumper any more. But accents? Hardly. Every American has one. New dialects spring up where they are least expected; familiar ones change continually but remain potent enough to define us or betray us. And we are pegged for our origins every time we do something as innocent as order a ham sandwich.
THOSE ORIGINS CAN be traced back to the day the English carried their bags ashore at Jamestown, Va., in 1607, and at Massachusetts 13 years later. The accent they brought along was part Elizabethan London and part rural speech from counties like Yorkshire and Lancashire. Those sounds - particularly the vowels - became the basis for the American English that was spoken in early Colonial settlements such as Boston, New York City and Charleston.

Dialects tend to burrow in these "focal areas," as linguists call such cities of influence, and soon more and more of them began to dot the landscape. In fact, America quickly became something of a shattered mirror of focal areas as waves of ethnic groups began grabbing land and building cities - the Dutch in New York, the Irish and Italians in New England, and the Ulster Scots and Germans in the South (where present-day stresses on words like "IN-surance" and "JU-ly" are relics of Germanic constructions).

The American English that began to move west during the 19th century came from the Eastern inland parts of the country - people along the Eastern seaboard did not participate in western migration as readily as those further inland, beach-front property being what it is. The dialect of Southern inland regions such as northern Georgia and the western Carolinas spread as far west as Texas, and established a few new focal areas, like Nashville and Little Rock, Ark., along the way. When this dialect collided with the Spanish influence in the Southwest, it then veered north into the Rockies.

"At the same time, there were all kinds of Northerners moving west," says Lee Pederson, a linguist at Emory University who has studied both Northern and Southern accents. "The dialect of Chicago, for example, is purely Northern inland. It came from western New England and Hartford, Conn., and became the basis for what you hear now around Cleveland, Detroit and the Great Lakes."

By the time prairie schooners came to a halt at the Pacific Ocean in the mid-1800's, the English they carried was a mixture of sundry Eastern dialects, mingled with foreign influences from the immigrants who were picked up en route. It retained little of its Colonial origins. Then, too, these California settlers discovered that not only had a few coastal Northeasterners beaten them around Cape Horn and planted their own brand of Northern accent in San Francisco and Los Angeles, but they also had claimed most of the good beach-front property.

Today's state boundaries -and often even city borders - are all but useless for determining who speaks what. Within Boston, for example, where ethnic communities have remained closely knit, you hear differences between the English spoken by the Italian Americans, Irish Americans and Americans who speak Yiddish. Even outside the East Coast, in those provinces thought to speak only dreary, standard American, regional peculiarities persist. In Pittsburgh, the football team is called the "STILL-ers"; in Idaho, the locals call the capital "BOY-see"; in Wisconsin, the big town by the lake is "Muh-WAUK-ee"; in New Mexico, they say "cheat" for sheet, and in Chicago it seems one Daley or another has always been the "Mare."
DIALECTS CHANGE with all the speed of a john-jumper, but they do change. It is quite possible that you do not speak precisely the way your grandfather does, although you both grew up on the same street. Linguists used to record those slight generational dissimilarities and then lament the demise of a regional dialect. Starting in the 1960's, however, socio-linguists began wondering why sounds change at all, and whether there might be some clues to social behavior behind the variances.

In 1963, for example, William Labov discovered that there were two distinct ways of speaking among year-round residents of Martha's Vineyard off the coast of Massachusetts - though it all sounded Yankee to outsiders. The older residents, who planned to remain on the island, had somehow reinforced their dialect as a way of distancing themselves from the mainlanders, who had begun buying up large portions of the island. The younger residents, who planned to leave the island, spoke more like the mainlanders than the people who had raised them.

Just as the islanders perceived outsiders as a threat to local life, so too, it appears, have established groups in the large cities viewed the wave of new ethnic groups -blacks, Hispanics and Asians - that have flooded into their communities since World War II. Using dialect has been one way of circling the wagons.

"Many of the things that people struggle for in this world, particularly jobs and houses, they achieve through their connections within the local community," says Labov. Language changes are often a defensive reaction against newcomers who seem to threaten these rights and privileges.

Sometimes these changes come in the form of new vocabulary; more often, linguists have learned, it is the vowel sounds that are affected. In the mid-1970's, Labov began studying the Northern dialect region from New England to the Great Lakes. He recorded the range of speech across three generations, and compared his findings with earlier linguistic surveys from the 1940's. He was startled to discover that a wholesale shifting of the short vowel sounds had occurred.

The shift essentially worked this way: Imagine that the numbers on the face of a clock are replaced by vowels. Whether because of a defensive reaction to new groups entering the territory or some other unknown factors, the vowel a at 1 o'clock begins crowding the vowel e at 2 o'clock. That then begins nudging i and so on, until the whole face has shifted slightly.

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Meanwhile, other shifts were discovered elsewhere in the East, but with different sets of vowels pressuring one another. In Philadelphia, "crayon" and "crown" were both said as "crayon"; "bounce" and "balance" both came out as "balance." In the Southern states, "pen" and "pin" had become homophonous. So cramped were other Southern

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Researchers found that these shifts in pronunciation generally behave like a slow-moving virus. Occasionally, though, the speed picks up dramatically. "In 1976 in Eastern Pennsylvania, we found that 5 percent of the kids we studied had merged the words 'caught' and 'cot' so that both were said as 'cot,' " says Labov. "Last year we went back and found that 80 percent are now doing it."

As accents continue to evolve, certain regions, principally the North and South, are finding it progressively difficult to understand one another. For example, when Labov's research team played a tape recording of a Chicago speaker to 40 lifelong residents of Birmingham, Ala., the sentence "He hadda wear socks" was interpreted correctly by only two people. The rest guessed that he said "He hadda wear slacks" or maybe it was "sacks." The sentence "When we had the busses with the antennas on the top" sounded for all the world to some Alabamans like "When we had the bosses Whitney antennas on the top."

There was another surprising, and disturbing, discovery. In none of these areas have lower-class blacks adopted the regional dialect changes. "One of the things we found, to our astonishment, was how similar black speech is throughout the country," says Labov. The reason, researchers say, is that while white middle-class residents of these areas look to the local community for their rewards, blacks, long denied those local rewards, view themselves as a national group with national aspirations. The result, says Labov, is that blacks and whites continue to grow further apart in the way each group speaks the language.

SOME AMERICANS, hoping perhaps to identify with a particular group - or conversely, to not be identified with a group -are desperate to purge any trace of their origins. And who could blame them? We are all instinctively aware of the stereotypes that arise the moment a person begins to speak. When television needs a hick with a heart of gold, it looks southward for a twangy moron like Ernest, the comedian of commercial fame: "Hey, Vern!" When a cold-hearted killer is called for, it's a Brooklynese speaker croaking "youse guys" - a surviving Irish pronunciation that New York City Mayor (Continued on Page 60) Edward I. Koch would like to hear shifted into oblivion.

Beverly Inman-Ebel, a speech pathologist in Chattanooga, Tenn., has spent the last seven years teaching Southerners - housewives and beauty queens, businessmen and politicians - how to reduce their regional dialects. "People come to me seeking a voice that doesn't stand out," she says. "When I ask clients whom they admire and would love to sound like, the men say Ronald Reagan and the women say Diane Sawyer."

For $75 to $175 an hour, Inman-Ebel helps clients untangle features of the Southern vowel shift, making "ten" and "tin" two separate sounds again. Sounding regional, she says, is increasingly a barrier to success. "One company just sent me three executives for accent reduction," she says. "One of them will become the C.E.O. How they speak is certainly not the only criterion for the promotion, but it is a factor."

Still, despite the best efforts of speech pathologists, most of us are pretty much stuck with our accents by the time we reach the age of 13. With that in mind, think of how often you've heard a 16-year-old say, "Hey, dude, like NEH-oh way!" Spooky, isn't it?

A couple of years ago, James W. Hartman, a linguist at the University of Kansas, started wondering about these sounds that teen-agers make. He had heard Moon Unit Zappa's gag-me-with-a-spoon routine, which parodied the way kids talk in the San Fernando Valley, about 1,500 miles west in Los Angeles County. Why was he hearing something disturbingly similar in the high school halls and shopping malls of Lawrence, Kan.? In Shakespeare's time, a fist fight between two boys might have started with the words "I yuke to pringle with you!" Now, it was

something closer to "Yer rilly gonna fill, like, SEH-oh bad in a minute, man." Could English still be on the correct evolutionary path?

Hartman first detected this phenomenon in 1983, while doing research for the Dictionary of American Regional English. He noticed that some young people were using certain vowel sounds that were not features of the areas where they grew up.

"The most mystifying aspect of all is why some sounds are chosen and others are not," says Hartman of the new accent, which appears to be a mix of various Northern and Southern dialects. "It's almost as though these kids all sat down at a meeting and agreed that these are the features we're going to use."

The "fronted O" sound, for example, which comes out as GEH-oh and NEH-oh, had long been a feature in the Baltimore area, but Hartman observed that something happened when it was picked up by kids in the Los Angeles area, kids who had no connection whatever to Baltimore. They added it to, among other things, a softening of vowels that fall before the letter l (words like "sale" were being pronounced "sell").

Hartman's research, still in its preliminary stages, has shown that the young people making these new noises appear to be between 16 and 25 years old; they typically come from upwardly mobile families and are college bound. That would make this latest phenomenon more of a social dialect - much like the Boston Brahmin accent - than a regional dialect.

In fact, what's most remarkable about the new dialect is how widespread it has become. Strongest in Southern California, where it seems to have started, the dialect apparently traveled across the United States from west to east roughly along Route 70. It is the first American dialect ever to move in that direction, which has prompted the name Sun-Belt Speak. But so far, the engine pumping it through young channels remains something of a mystery.

The influence of television has mostly been ruled out, simply because TV has little, if any, effect on an accent. "Peer pressure, school, or anything you have an involvement in affects language -not television," says Donna Christian, director of the research division at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington. "What matters is who will judge you or whom you're trying to impress in some way. There's no reason to become more like the television."

There's probably nothing to fear from Sun-Belt Speak. It will prove no better at uprooting entrenched regional accents than Johnny Carson has been. Like any other new dialect that has passed over the continent in the last four centuries, a vowel here or a word there may survive. But in 80 years, these, too, will become but a faint addition to the drawls and quacks we hear around us. Right?

"I don't have a clue," says Hartman. "But I will say that since I started looking into this, people have sent me tapes from all over the country, and Sun-Belt Speak is more widespread than I'd first thought. It has appeared in northern Ohio and southern Florida, for example. I wouldn't even be surprised if it showed up soon in a place like, say, upstate New York."

DETAILS

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