

# Some aspects of American Dialects

KOZAWA KIYOSHI

In this paper, we would like to look at the field of linguistic geography in broad general fashion, defining a few essential terms, noting the three kinds of dialect differences, and examining the most important reasons for such differences.

## Some Definitions

What is meant by "language" and "dialect"? Furthermore what is the difference between a "dialect" and a "language"?

What is language?

Among the various activities of men everywhere there is at least one common feature of culture which appears to be indispensable—language. It is recognized primarily as a complicated system of signaling facilitated by the mechanism of the voice. It is acquired over the years by contact with other people and not without considerable effort. Above all, it enables us to transmit information, to store up knowledge, and to formulate directives for the governing of human affairs. General definitions of language vary, but linguists and anthropologists more or less agree that it is "a purely arbitrary system of vocal symbols by means of which human beings interact."

All known peoples possess language. Many, of course, have no means of representing their speech in the form of writing. In fact, some authorities estimate that there are more than two thousand languages in the world which have never been reduced to writing. Writing, therefore, must be considered a secondary manifestation of language. Likewise, other such representations and devices exist, some rather crude and some more elaborate; gesture, facial expressions, code, signals, weather vanes, and road signs are among them.

What then is a dialect?

This is more difficult question to answer than the first. For languages normally consist of dialect, or special varieties of usage within the range of a given linguistic system, according to the social or geographical disposition of its speakers.

We may begin by stating what a dialect is not. It is not the unusual and strange-sounding accent and word usage of a foreign-born person. Such a speaker learned English as a foreign language after he had mastered his own native tongue. His spoken English may be dramatically different from yours, but the difference is individual, belonging to him alone. His pronunciations, word choices, and sentence patterns are influenced by those of his native language.

The word "dialect," however, is associated not with individuals but with speech communities. A speech community is a group of people who are in constant communication with one another. Such a group speaks its own dialect; that is, the members of the group have certain language habits in common. For example, a family is a speech community; the members of the family talk together constantly, and certain words have certain special meanings within the family group. Or, the people who belong to your class in school form

a speech community, sharing certain special ways of talking together—the latest slang, for instance. The people who work together in a single office are a speech community. Larger speech communities may be the members of a single occupation or profession. Carpenters share certain typical carpentry terms; lawyers converse using special legal terms.

An even larger speech community is the people who live in a certain geographic region. The study of such speech communities is called “dialect geography,” “linguistic geography,” or “area linguistics.” The scholar who studies regional varieties of a language is called “a dialect geographer,” or “a linguistic geographer,” or “a dialectologist.”

When these scholars use the term *dialect*, it has a specific and scientific meaning, without any negative or derogatory connotations. By “dialect,” linguistic geographers mean a variety of speech which is used in a certain locality or region and which differs in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar from other varieties spoken in other localities or regions. Furthermore, local or regional dialects differ from the standard language—the “book words” that could be used in any region of the country.

Sometimes, in nonscientific usage, certain other words are confused with the term *dialect*. Let's examine four of these words; *localism*, *colloquialism*, *slang*, and *jargon*. A *localism* is a dialect form; that is, it is characteristic of a particular place or region. Contrariwise, a *colloquialism* has no connection with geography. It refers instead to a form that is characteristic of relaxed, informal conversation. Everybody uses colloquialisms because everybody converses with his friends. Colloquialisms are perfectly proper and natural in spoken English; the word has no negative or derogatory connotations.

A writer, of course, avoids colloquialisms unless he is deliberately reporting oral conversation or trying to reflect it by his style of writing. *Slang* is one very popular form of extremely informal language. It is full of clipped and shortened word forms, newly invented words, old words used with new meanings, and wild, exotic figures of speech. Basically, it is violent metaphor. Usually slang is used by a rather small and intimate speech community; knowing the proper slang is a sign of belonging to the group. Among its users it becomes quickly popular and quickly dated. The French call slang *la langue verte*, “the green language,” thereby recognizing its vitality. Slang sometimes enriches the standard language, though only its most useful coinages endure.

Our last term is *jargon*. Generally defined, jargon is a type of language which contains an unusually large number of words unfamiliar to the average user of the language. These words are characteristic of a particular occupation, hobby, or social group. The term *jargon* is often used disapprovingly by persons who lack knowledge of the specialized field under discussion. They feel frequently that the users of jargon are deliberately trying to be unnecessary obscure and esoteric.

What again is a dialect?

Linguists speak of English, German, and Dutch as “Germanic dialects,” since they derive from a common parent and are closely related. High and Low German are known as “German dialects,” since they are associated with the national language shared by their speakers. Thus, we can see that a language may be defined either on a historical basis, as a collection of related dialects, or on a political basis, as a collection of related dialects in a given area, often encompassing a single nationality. Strictly speaking, different languages are not

mutually intelligible (although there are some notable exceptions, such as certain varieties of Chinese).

We shall assume, however, that British and American English are collections of dialects within the English language, which we shall speak of as "British dialects," ("Scottish," "Irish," etc., as the case may be) and "American dialects," respectively, in line with certain geographical considerations. At the same time, we shall keep in mind the fact that the English language is, in another sense, a dialect derivated of a Germanic language branch which, in turn, is descended from the great Indo-European parent stock.

Dialects may be geographical in the sense of being spoken by people living in certain areas. Although the boundaries of such dialects are often clearly limited by certain differences in speech habits, the transition from one dialect area to another may also be very gradual, so that differences can only be noted between centers of widely separated areas, or centers of maximum difference.

Older settlements, such as those existing on the continent of Europe, often show sharp and extensive differences, while colonial areas, such as those found in the United States, tend to be more homogenous. Dialects of colonial areas are also more often uniform over a wider area than those of the smaller areas of a mother country, and it is for this reason that people living in a relatively new territory (such as the Pacific Northwest) rarely notice a significant feature of dialect difference in the speech around them.

Personal differences are frequently more striking and are easily mistaken for the systematic type of differences which can be assigned to dialects. Linguists call the speech of individuals their "idiolects." Each person makes use of his language in a way peculiar to their individual history. In so far as he does not conform exactly to the speech habits of theirs with a similar history, he is marked by the features of his own "idiolect." Thus we say: "Oh, I thought that was Bill talking," "He talks like John," "Jane talks with a kind of a lisp," or "I can always recognize him by the tone of his voice," etc.

But dialects (which are composites of idiolects) may also be classified according to criteria other than geographical ones. For instance, a clearly marked social or economic class organizes and makes use of language according to its own requirements. In class-conscious Europe this is much more the case than in the United States. Bernard Shaw illustrated the nature of class dialects very well in his play *Pygmalion*, where he had a professor of phonetics make a lady out of a poor flower girl simply by teaching to speak (as well as to act) in accordance with the conventions of an upper-class society.

We may return now to our second big question: what exactly is the difference between a dialect and a language?

A dialect is the variety of language of a single homogeneous speech community. As long as each dialect is understandable by the speakers of its neighboring dialect, we are dealing with the same language, even though speakers who are separated by three or four intervening dialects may both be able to understand each other.

However, when the majority of members of one speech community cannot understand the speech of another speech community, then they speak different languages. Thus some languages may stretch over large geographic areas, as English does in the United States, with only relatively small differences in the different regions. On the other hand, many

separate languages may exist within a relatively small geographic area, as the languages of Europe exist side by side on the continent.

In summary, we may say that a language is usually a composite structure of overlapping dialects and that each dialect within the language is a composite structure of overlapping idiolects. An idiolect is the speech pattern of one individual at one particular time of his life.

The most significant step in the progress of English towards its status as a world language took place in the last decades of the sixteenth century, with the arrival of the expeditions commissioned by Walter Raleigh to the 'New World'. The first venture was a failure. In 1584 the first group of explorers landed near Roanoke Island, in what is today called North Carolina, and established a small settlement. But conflict with the Indians followed, and it proved necessary for a ship to return to England for help and supplies. By the time those arrived, in 1590, none of the original group of settlers could be found. The mystery of their disappearance has never been solved.

The first permanent English settlement dates from 1607, when an expedition arrived in Chesapeake Bay, and called the settlement Jamestown, after James I. Further settlement quickly followed along the coast, and also on the nearby islands—Bermuda, and later the Bahamas. Then, in 1620, the first group of Puritan settlers arrived on the *Mayflower*—the 'pilgrim Fathers'—searching for a land where they could found a new religious kingdom 'purified' from the practices which they found unacceptable in the English Church of the time. They landed at Cape Cod, in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and established a settlement there (a way of life which has in recent times been lovingly recreated by a group of 'living history' enthusiasts). By 1640 around 25,000 people had settled in the area.

It is important to appreciate that these two patterns of settlement resulted in different linguistic consequences. The southern explorers came mainly from the West Country, and brought with them the characteristic west-country accent, with its 'Zummerzet' voicing of s sounds, and the *r* pronounced after vowels. Strong hints of this accent can still be heard in the speech of communities living in some of the isolated valleys and islands in the area, such as Tangier Island in Chesapeake Bay. These 'Tidewater' accents, as they are called, will have changed somewhat over the past 300 years, but not as rapidly (because of the relative isolation of the speakers) as elsewhere in the country. They are sometimes said to be the closest we ever get to the sound of Shakespearean English.

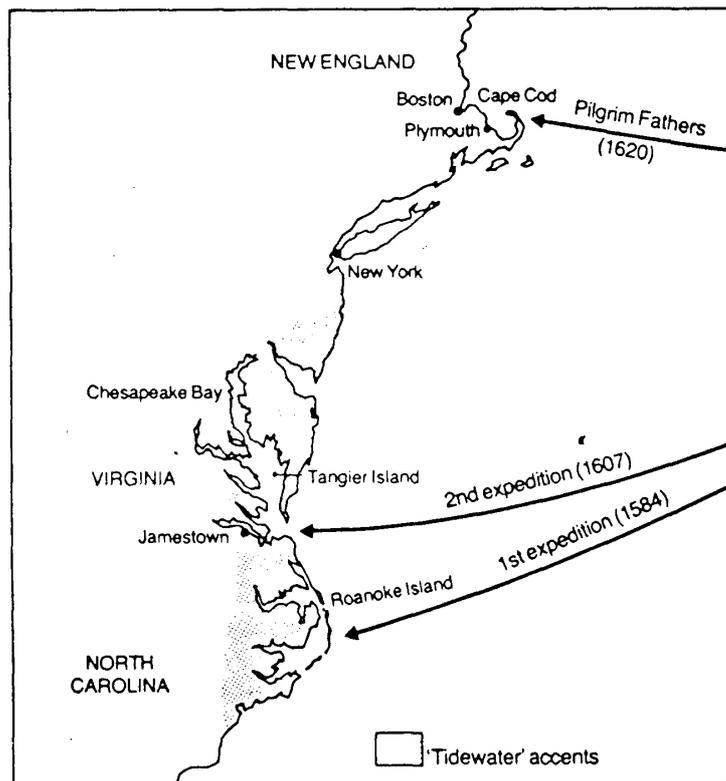
In contrast, the Puritans came mainly from East Anglia and the surrounding counties, and their accent was quite different—notably lacking an *r* after vowels (as in present-day standard English). This tendency not to 'pronounce the *r*' is still a main feature of the speech of people from the New England area today.

The separateness of the colonies remained for much of the seventeenth century, but during this time increasing contacts and new patterns of settlement caused the sharp divisions between accents to begin to blur. New shiploads of settlers brought people with a variety of linguistic backgrounds, and the 'middle' Atlantic areas began to be opened up. The area around New York saw a rapid development. From 1681, Pennsylvania came to be settled mainly by Quakers, whose origins were mostly in the Midlands and North of England. By 1700, immigrant population of the continent had increased to around a quarter of a million.

In the early eighteenth century, there was a vast wave of immigration from northern Ireland. The Irish had been migrating to America from around 1600, but the main movements took place during the 1720s, when around 50,000 Irish and Scots-Irish immigrants arrived. By the time Independence was declared in 1776, it is thought that no less than one in seven of the American population was Scots-Irish. Many stayed along the coast, especially in the area of Philadelphia, but most moved inland through the mountains in search of land. They were seen as frontier people, with an accent which at the time was described as 'broad'. The opening up of the South and West was largely due to the pioneering spirit of this group of settlers—a spirit well captured in the tales of the frontiersman Davy Crockett (1786-1836), who was one of many with a Scots-Irish background.

By the time of the first census, in 1790, the population of the continent was around four million, most of whom lived along the Atlantic coast. A century later, after opening up of the West, the population numbered over fifty million, spread all over the continent. Much of the movement west had been led by the Scots-Irish. The accent which emerged can now be heard all over the so-called 'Sunbelt', and is the accent most commonly associated with a present-day American speech.

*Early English-speaking settlement areas in America*



Linguistic geography reveals that dialect differences are of three kinds: differences in pronunciation, differences in vocabulary, and differences in grammar.

#### 1. Differences in Pronunciation

Differences in pronunciation are of two types: systematic and individual. A systematic difference is one that affects a whole group of words in a similar way. For instance, in Eastern New England, the sound of "r" is consistently lost except before vowels. In this same geographic region, the sound of "r" often appears from nowhere between two vowel sounds, as in the "the idear of it." Furthermore, the same phenomena occur in New York

City and in the South also. Many such systematic differences occur in American English pronunciation.

Individual differences, the second kind of pronunciation differences, affect only a single word or a group of closely related words. Probably the best known of such differences is that which affects the verb *grease* and the adjective *greasy*. Southern speakers pronounce both these words with a “z” sound, whereas Northern speakers pronounce both these words with an “s” sound. Another interesting group is *merry*, *Mary*, and *marry*. Many speakers pronounce these three words so that they all rhyme. However, in Pennsylvania *Mary* rhymes with *merry* but not with *marry*. In the South, none of the three words rhymes with either of the other two. Such individual differences in pronunciation—and there are many in the United States—are highly interesting but not really so important as the larger systematic differences.

The standard alphabet cannot record such systematic or individual differences in pronunciation. The professional linguistic geographer uses a highly detailed phonetic alphabet to make his field records. The student can easily learn and use a simpler set of symbols to record the variations he meets in his dialect studies. The symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (called “IPA”) are usually listed in dictionaries and serve well to help students transcribe speech.

## 2. Differences in Vocabulary

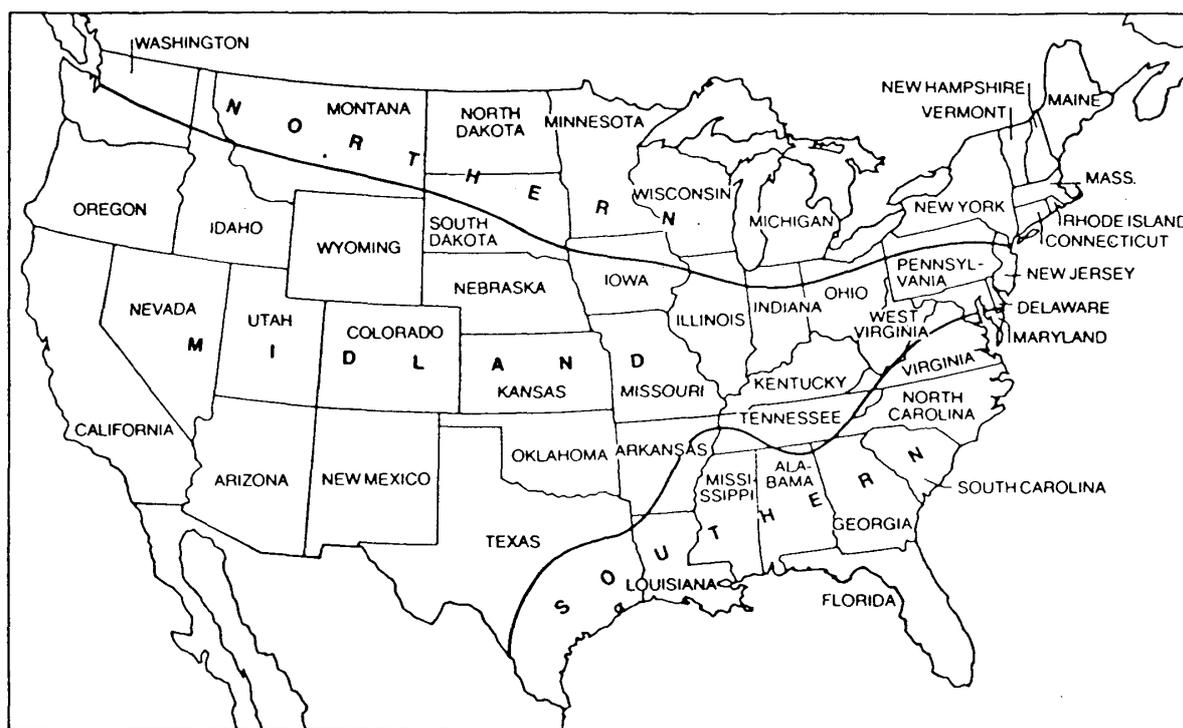
The second kind of contrast concerns differences in vocabulary. These differences are the easiest to observe and probably the most interesting to discuss. Notice these groups of words; they all refer to the same thing but are the different names which are used in different regions of the United States.

*creek, stream, brook, run, branch, fork, prong, gulf, riverlet, rivulet, gutter cottage cheese, clabber cheese, pot cheese, Dutch cheese, smear cheese, sour-milk cheese, curd, home-made cheese*

If you have listened to speakers in different parts of the United States with careful attention, you probably can think of other similar sets of words.

## 3. Differences in Grammar

The third kind of contrast involves differences in grammar. For instance, a majority of Northern speakers prefer *dove* as the past tense of *dive*; a majority of Southern speakers prefer *dived*. In Midland areas, both forms occur, with *dove* preferred by the more modern and better educated speakers. Another grammatical example is the use of *all the farther* in a sentence like, “Two miles is all the farther he can go.” People in New England use *as far as*, not *all the further*, although it is often used in other regions on the Atlantic Seaboard and in the North-Central States of Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio. Farther west, it is heard in Minnesota and Iowa but not in Nebraska or North and South Dakota.



*The main dialect divisions in the USA*

### Reasons for Dialect Differences

If some mighty dictator conquered the world and ordered all the world's people to speak one uniform language, and if this dictator miraculously enforced his decree, nevertheless within one generation this language would change. Each child, no matter how hard he tries to copy his parents' language, always speaks slightly differently from the way they do. These changes pile up through the years so that eventually we have forms of the language as different as Shakespeare's is from yours. Furthermore, language changes differently in different parts of the world.

The development of the Romance languages—especially Italian, French, Spanish, and Rumanian—from Latin is a fine example of a change in which a single parent language evolved through the centuries into several daughter languages. The Roman soldiers and administrators who conquered, occupied, and governed the provinces of the Roman empire did not speak the formal, precise Latin which you study in school. They spoke a more fluid and flexible form of the language. It was called "Latin of the People" or "Vulgar Latin." (The Latin word, *vulgus*, means "the crowd.") Thus even in the mouths of these Romans the Latin of literature and the Latin of speech were different. Further changes accumulated until finally various Romance languages developed. These languages are called "Romance" because they came from the Roman language.

The forces which cause such dialect differences are strong and interesting. These forces are apparent in all parts of the world, but we shall focus on the United States.

#### 1. Early Settlement History

Any large or important group which settles in any particular region will contribute some elements of its language to the speech of its new home. Looking back to the history of the thirteen original colonies from which the country grew, we see first a large migration of

English people. They came chiefly from the southern and midland counties of England, but there were some families from Yorkshire, Lancashire, and even the farther north counties of England. Each of these counties in England had its own local dialect, and the settlers brought these dialects to the New World with them. Gradually, in the course of several generations, these dialects were blended into distinctively American dialects. Later, Ulster Scotsmen, Palatinate Germans, Dutchmen, all added important words to American English. These contributions characterized the English of the locality where each of these different population groups settled. The Spanish in California also made their distinctive contribution to American English, as did the French in Louisiana.

## 2. Physical Geography

Mountain ranges, rivers, marshes, and deserts may affect the character of different dialects. In some cases, such natural phenomena may block the spread of certain words or expressions. In other cases, they may add words to the vocabulary to name geographic features peculiar to certain regions. For instance, in Colorado the word *park* is used to mean mountain meadow in the mountainous area and in the nearby foothill communities but not elsewhere in the state. In Colorado *prairie dog owl* is heard only in communities on or near the eastern plains of the state. In that part of Colorado, the expression "The wind is rising" or "the wind is raising" seems very appropriate. In this arid locality, you can actually "see" the wind from a distance.

## 3. Cultural Centers

Great cities—like New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco—acquire prestige and become influential socially, economically, and culturally. They dominate the regions around them, and their speech ways are copied by speakers in these surrounding regions. The influence of the great cities on the Atlantic seaboard is second only to that of the original settlement history in determining dialects there. For instance, words have spread westward from Philadelphia to the Alleghenies and southward along Delaware and Chesapeake Bay. Some of these typical words are *pavement* for 'side walk,' *baby coach* for 'baby carriage,' *flannel cakes* for 'griddle cakes,' *button wood* for 'sycamore,' *coal oil* for 'kerosene,' and *snake doctor* for 'dragon fly.'

## 4. Social Structure of the Area

In any country where social classes are clearly defined, the dialects of each class will show unmistakable differences. In England, for instance, the speech of the Wessex peasants in Hardy's novels is strikingly distinct from the speech of his upper class characters. The latter speak Received Standard English. In the United States, no sharp dialectal lines divide social classes. All children there are taught standard English in their schools. This is the language used to transact the important affairs of their country. As you might expect, a person's dialect tends to reflect the length of time he has spent in school. The college graduate speaks differently from the high school graduate; both of them speak differently from the person who has had an eighth grade education or less. In this book, we are not concerned with these socio-educational differences. We are studying the regional differences which are observable in the standard English of cultivated speakers.

### 5. Late Immigration

The dialects of a region may reflect the arrival of a large group of new immigrants with a native language different from that of the inhabitants of the regional to which they migrate. If members of this new group introduce new articles or ideas, their names for these innovations may be added to the old language. For example, about the middle of the nineteenth century, crowds of newcomers arrived in the United States from Germany. Consequently, English was soon enriched with many new words—*delicatessen*, *pretzel*, *zwieback*, *frankfurter*, and especially *hamburger*—to name only a few.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SOURCE

- C.E. Reed, "What is linguistics?" *German Quarterly*, XXV  
Bryant, Margaret M., ed, *Current American Usage*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1962  
Ibid, *Dialects USA*.  
Mackwardt, Albert H., *American English*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1955  
McDavid, Raven I., Jr. "American Dialect Studies since 1939," *Philologica*, 4 (1949)  
Reed, Carroll E., *American Dialects*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958  
Ibid, "The Pronunciation of English in the Pacific Northwest," *Language*, 37 (1954)  
Pyles, Thomas, *Words and Ways of American English*. New York: Random House, 1952  
"The pronunciation of English in the Pacific Northwest," *Language*, 37 (1972) 5  
Crystal, David, *The English Language*. Penguin, London 1990