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ABSTRACT

Patterns of dialect shift and language standardization in the United States are examined and illustrated with regional dialect maps. In particular, the relationship between the disappearance of regional accents and negative attitudes about accents is discussed. It is concluded that there is a long-term trend toward a more uniform accent among educated individuals, a national standard of pronunciation, in all regions of the country and that the standard regional dialects are in decline. Syntax and morphology are already virtually uniform, and vocabulary differences are largely restricted to terms for local phenomena. It is also predicted that the prominent dialect differences within the country will eventually correlate with social class and be perceived not as neutral but as deviant, supporting stereotypes. The only solution to this situation seen as feasible is a popular movement to counter negative stereotypes of regional accents and slow down the trend toward cultural homogeneity. (MSE)

Linguistic Diversity in America: Will We All Speak "General American"?

by Russell Tabbert

Our country's motto *E pluribus unum*—"out of many, one"—nicely focuses a fundamental ambiguity in our national character. Does the motto describe a process or a relation? That is, does our strength and uniqueness result from a transformation in which the many lose their distinctive identities and become one? Or are we who we are because at one level we remain vibrantly many, but at another level we are united by a set of core values? It seems to depend on how you look at it—and when. Sometimes it's a vase, but then suddenly it's two faces in profile staring at each other. Sometimes it's wave, sometimes particle. Sometimes melting pot, sometimes salad bowl.

Our ambivalence about unity and diversity is readily apparent in our attitudes toward language. We claim to encourage and respect other languages. Yet we are so uncomfortable with their use in our midst that we try to pass English-only laws and to banish bilingual education. We enjoy **some** features of **some** American English dialects. Yet we become very upset when the schools aren't firmly rejecting nonstandard varieties, and we often are intolerant of standard regional accents other than our own.

In my talk today I will deal with just one of these manifestations of discomfort with linguistic diversity: that of regional accents in the U.S. In doing so I will be less interested in the actual linguistic features of regional accents as in our perceptions of and attitudes towards them—that is, which regional speech patterns we notice as being different and label with terms such as "drawl" or "twang" or "brogue" or as being "thick" or "heavy" or "syrupy" or "grating." For I believe that such perceptions of accent play an important role in how we react to and interact with people, influencing us both positively and negatively. And collectively, these perceptions of accent are, I believe, influencing the direction of change in U.S. English, thus raising the question that I pose in my subtitle: "Will we all speak 'General American'?"

But first a bit of background.

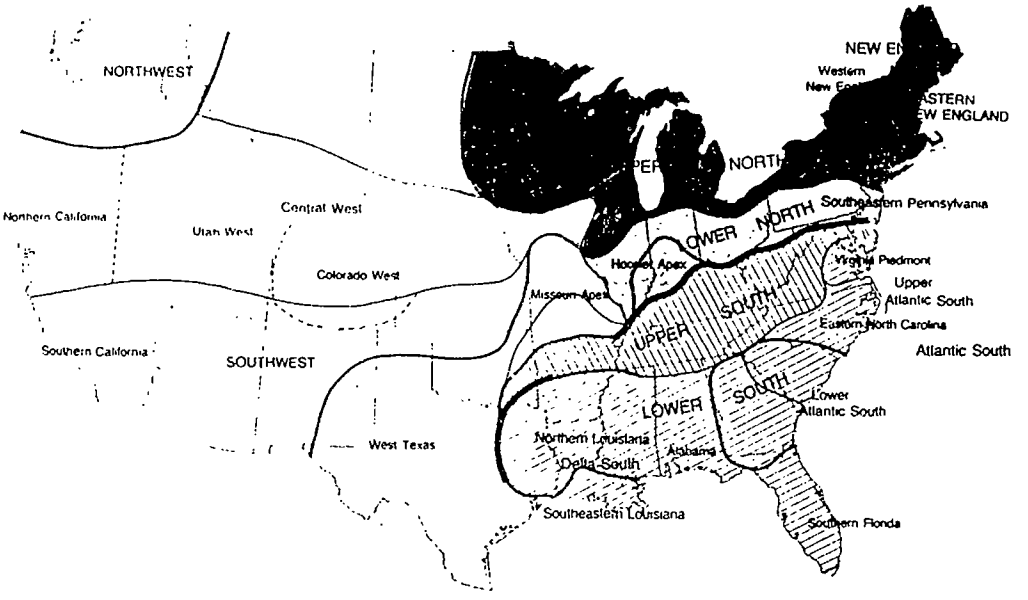
For about the last forty years the prevailing interpretation of American regional dialects has been the one shown on the following map:

Map 6

From Roger Shuy, *Discovering American Dialects* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967), 47. Based on data collected by various Linguistic Atlas of the United States projects.

Three main dialect areas are posited: Northern, Midland, and Southern, each with a number of subdivisions. This picture of American regional dialects began to emerge about mid-century as results became available from field studies for what were called "linguistic atlases." These projects employed specially trained fieldworkers using a carefully constructed questionnaire to gather data from representative speakers throughout a region. Such studies have been completed for the area of the U.S. east of the Mississippi. However, further west, the atlas studies are piecemeal and are likely to remain so.

A more recent—but not fundamentally different—analysis of American regional dialects is presented by the next map:



8.1. The Major Dialect Regions Summarized

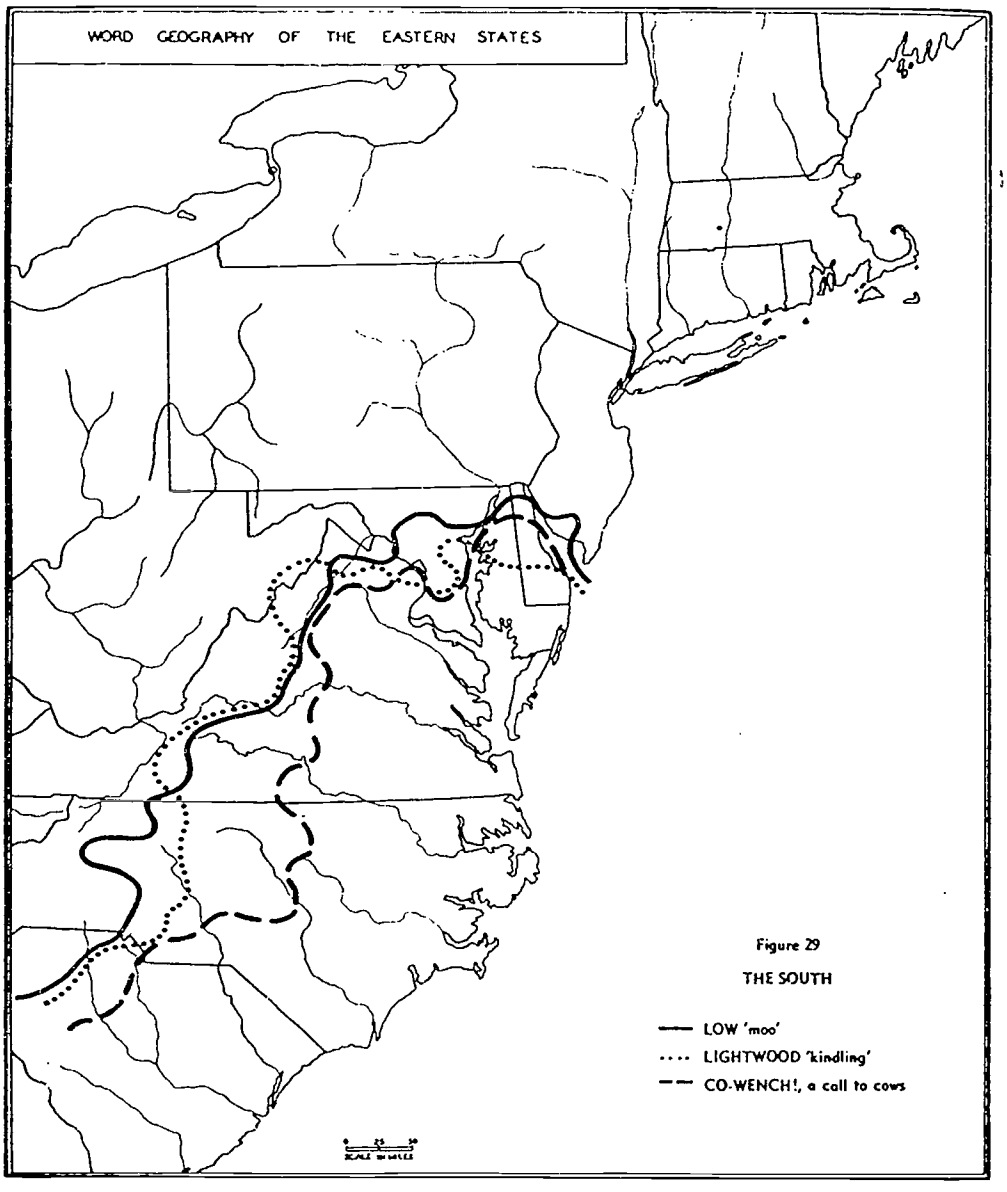
From Craig Carver, *American Regional Dialects: A Word Geography* (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 1987), 248. Based on data collected by the Dictionary of American Regional English project.

The data supporting this interpretation were collected for the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (which I will refer to it by its acronym DARE). This project, which is based at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, also sent out skilled fieldworkers to interview representative speakers according to a set questionnaire. However, unlike the atlas studies, the fieldwork for DARE covered the entire country, though with a much wider sampling grid. The main difference between the linguistic atlas and the DARE interpretations is that the Midland area, which atlas studies claimed was a major dialect region, is demoted to subdivision status as the Lower North and the Upper South. Thus, according to DARE, the fundamental linguistic divide in the U.S. is between the North and the South. In addition, analysis of DARE data identified the speech of the Western U.S. as predominantly an extension of the Northern dialect.

These two maps represent the accepted doctrine about American regional dialects. Explanations based on these interpretations appear widely in current textbooks, dictionaries, and other reference works. During my teaching career this is what I taught about regional diversity in American English. However, I now have some doubts. I don't disagree with the interpretation of the data which the projects collected. But I do question its accuracy as a picture of present-day regional variation.

A number of factors make the linguistic atlas and DARE version of American regional dialects of questionable relevance to the current situation. One is that the data is old. Most of the atlas fieldwork was done between the 1930s to 1950s. And the DARE fieldwork was carried out in the 1960s. But in an important sense the data is actually much older than that, for both studies placed a priority on discovering traditional, conservative, even old-fashioned speech habits. Many of the interviewees were middle-aged or elderly, and thus had acquired their dialects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Equally problematic for contemporary relevance is the focus of the atlas and DARE questionnaires on aspects of rural and small town life of an era now past—that is, a time before the mechanization of farming, before the revolutions in communications and transportation, before the expansion of education, before the increase in geographic mobility, and before the shift from rural to urban and suburban living. I always found that my students had a hard time believing in dialect boundaries that were heavily determined by such things as variant calls to cows and pigs or by terminology for hitching up a team of horses or by folk expressions dealing with weather, flora, fauna, and other aspects of living close to the land. For example, the map reproduced below is the sort frequently reprinted to illustrate how the atlas data was used to establish the existence of dialect boundaries:



From Hans Kurath, *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 1949), figure 29.

Not only have many of the phenomena that were investigated become old-fashioned or disappeared. But even when a referent has remained part of modern life, more often than not the variant names have lost their clear regional patterning. For example, atlas studies found regional distributions for *pail* vs. *bucket*, *frying pan* vs. *skillet*, *eave spouts* vs. *eave troughs*, and *gutters*, *string beans* vs. *green beans* and *snap beans*, etc. Today, all of these terms still remain active, and there may even be a tendency for one of the variants to be used more frequently in a region. However, as a result of what we might call the homogenization of

experience—that is, the effects of mass media, mass marketing, mass culture, and geographic mobility—virtually everyone everywhere in the U.S. knows all these variants. They have become merely synonyms, carrying little or no regional association for most people.

Now of course there still are many words that do have regional distribution, and for that reason can be used to define regional dialects, at least in a technical sense. These are the terms for phenomena which themselves are regionally restricted. For example, in my study of Alaskan English, I found very few uniquely Alaskan terms for phenomena that also occurred elsewhere—that is, very few like the Alaskan terms *snowmachine* and *snowgo* for what almost everywhere else in the U.S. is called *snowmobile*. However, there are many terms which are more or less unique to Alaskan English because the things they refer to are unique to Alaska. For example, you won't find equivalent Southern or New England terms for the Alaskan words *muktuk* or *breakup* or *ice fog* or *Eskimo ice cream* simply because the phenomena which these words name don't occur in the South or in New England. Most regions have at least a few such more or less unique features of climate, culture, history, flora, fauna, etc. which of course have names. Those names can be associated with the region and, hence, the language of the region. However, these, I think, are relatively insignificant in forming our impression of regional dialect. What stands out for us is the phenomenon itself, not its name. For example, if you go to Alaska and in a gift shop in Fairbanks find a delicate knit shawl or scarf or hat made out of qiviut, your first reaction is probably not going to be "Why do they call it qiviut?" or "What an interesting sounding word!" but rather "What is qiviut?" We focus on the phenomenon. That is, our impression is of differences in the region, not of differences in the language of the region.

In sum, I think that today very little of our impression of regional dialect comes from differences in vocabulary. Nor do differences in morphology and syntax play much of a role in our perception of regional dialect in the U.S. With only a few exceptions, such as Southern *you-all*, the grammar of educated speech is virtually uniform throughout the country. In fact, so obsessed are we with grammatical "correctness" that regional differences which once were standard informal usage have become tainted and are often judged as nonstandard—for example, Southern double modals such as *might could* and *used to could*.

This leaves, then, only pronunciation. I believe that our primary impression of U.S. regional dialects comes from differences in pronunciation. In

fact, British linguists would claim that pronunciation differences aren't dialect differences at all. Unlike American linguists, who consider that a dialect consists of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, **and** pronunciation, British linguists separate out pronunciation. A dialect, they say, is the words, the forms, and the syntax. A particular dialect may be spoken differently by people from different regions or people with different social or ethnic backgrounds. Those various oral manifestations are not different dialects, but different accents. So for example, we can say that one of the dialects of American English is standard English—the variety which I am claiming is virtually uniform in vocabulary and grammar among educated speakers throughout the U.S. But when this dialect is spoken, it is rendered in various accents, including various regional accents. The dialect is the same; the accents are different. The question that I am raising is "how different?" Are the regional accents used to speak the standard U.S. dialect becoming leveled?

In attempting to answer this I will use another concept originated by European linguists. It is the notion of "perceptual dialect." By this I mean a set of mental instructions which dictates our perception of and reaction to features in the speech of others. We aren't electro-mechanical devices that take in the complete speech stream and process it objectively. Rather, we hear speech selectively, attending unconsciously to what we have learned to notice and ignoring all else. Among other things, this means that we develop a perceptual template for dialects—or perhaps a better metaphor would be a perceptual filter—which focuses our attention on certain speech features that we identify as being "different"—as constituting a "dialect," an "accent," a "drawl," a "twang," etc. Conversely, this perceptual template also allows us **not** to notice differences within the speech variety that we identify with as our own.

Up until about 1950, when the linguistic atlas results started coming out, the prevailing scholarly interpretation of American dialects matched most people's perceptual dialect map, a consensus based upon accent. There was Eastern New England, represented by Boston speech. There was, of course, the South. Sometimes also singled out as a separate speech area was New York City. And then there was everything else. The everything else region, comprised of the Inland North, the Upper Midwest, and the West, was referred to as "General American," a term which captured not only its wide geographic spread and large number of speakers, but also the assumption that it was the true or basic or typical manifestation of American speech. This status was reinforced when

emerging network radio adopted General American as its pronunciation standard, creating thereby a parallel to the situation in Britain where the so-called "RP"—that is, "Received Pronunciation"—became the sole BBC standard. As the *NBC Handbook of Pronunciation* published in 1943 put it, "When a broadcaster speaks over a powerful station or nation-wide hook-up, he desires to use a pronunciation that is most readily understood by the majority of his listeners. In such an event, the broadcaster would be well advised to use a pronunciation widely known among phoneticians as 'General American,' the standard presented in this book" (p. ix).

I would contend that in the years since, the dominant perceptual dialects have become even more strongly Southern, Eastern New England, and General American. And in spite of the preaching of linguists like me that all dialects are equal and that standard English can be legitimately spoken with various regional accents, I am afraid that the positive and negative attitudes associated with these perceptual dialects have also increased. That is, the prestige of the General American accent has continued to grow and spread while the status of other perceptual accents has continued to decline.

But first, what is this so-called "General American"? This network-speak "norm" which many people feel is just naturally present like the pure air? Linguistically, it's hard to make a case that it exists at all—that is, that the millions of educated speakers spread over such a vast area share a single, uniform system of pronouncing English. Instead, what we find is considerable variation in minor details of pronunciation and one rather amazing major difference. This is that large numbers of people in the North, Midwest, and West have one less phoneme—that is, one less basic sound distinction—than do other speakers from within this very same area. Consider the word pairs listed below. In traditional General American pronunciation, these words are minimal pairs, that is, they differ by only one phoneme, in this case their vowel. The column A words have /a/, a low central unrounded vowel. Column B words have /ɔ/, a low back rounded vowel. Thus,

A	B
/a/	/ɔ/
stock	stalk
cot	caught
pa	paw
Don	dawn

knotty	naughty
tot	taught
collar	caller
odd	awed

The paired words are distinctly different for me and for many middle-aged and older people throughout the North, Midwest, and West. However, for many others from this area—especially younger speakers —this /a/-/ɔ/contrast is absent. These word pairs are pronounced exactly alike, the vowel usually being the low central unrounded /a/.

I must emphasize strongly that people who have this merged system do not suffer a speech defect. Nor are they participating in a corruption of the language. Rather, they are part of a natural process of sound change of the sort that has occurred numerous times in the history of English—and in all other languages as well. Over time, languages always change, including alterations in their basic sound systems. It's true that as a result of this /a/-/ɔ/merger , the spelling system of English goes a bit further astray from the alphabetic ideal of a one-to-one correspondence between sound and symbol. We'll probably see more confusions of the sort illustrated in these quotations:

a. "The West Virginia legislature was receiving calls from fishermen protesting the proposed law against people "stalking" other people. The fishermen said they had heard the legislature was proposing to ban "stocking," as in the stocking of streams with fish." (*Des Moines Register*)

b. " . . . a sophisticated cleaning plant sifts out the seed, separates it from stock and weeds, and . . ." (*Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*)

c. " . . . and stock its prey slowly." (student paper)

d. "The kids were very hushed, a bit an-stricken." (student paper)

e. "Supervised a 2-man crew on an industrial embassing machine." (résumé)

However, the functional load carried by the /a/-/ɔ/contrast is relatively low. And historically English speakers have learned to live with the effects of similar mergers: for example, the falling together of large numbers of *-ee-* words and *-ea-* words, such as *meet* and *meat*, *see* and *sea*, which at one time were pronounced with a distinctive vowel contrast.

What is especially interesting about this ongoing /a/-/ɔ/merger and the resulting mixed nature of General American pronunciation is that hardly anyone notices it. Those of us from the area perceive that we speak the same—or at least

that there are not any major internal differences. Yet in contrast to our obliviousness to this difference, we are sharply attuned to a few features which we use to identify other accents—especially Eastern New England and Southern —features which are phonetically much less significant than the /a/-/ɔ/merger. In other words, although it is true that linguistic reality plays a role in our perception of U.S. dialects, it is a heavily filtered reality. As part of our aculturation we learn what speech features to ignore and what features to notice. And for those features that our learning forces us to notice, we have also often learned judgmental attitudes towards them.

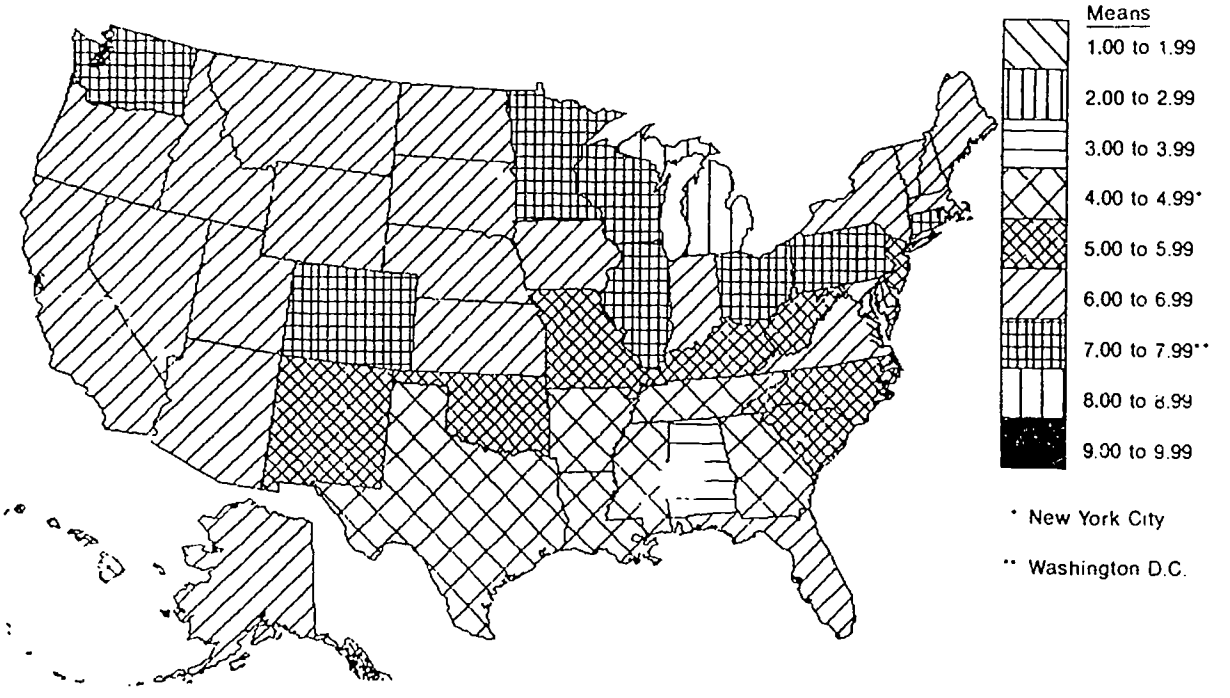
In particular, we have inherited a long tradition—one going well back into the nineteenth century—of looking down on Southern speech and of associating it with negative stereotypes of Southern character. Here, for example, is how this was expressed in a 1947 handbook designed to teach actors and writers how to imitate U.S. accents:

> "The speech of the Southerner, for instance, is drawled because of the slow, easygoing temperament with which warm climates endow their inhabitants. The speech of the 'businesslike' Yankee emerges as a sharp, dry, succinctly enunciated crackle." (p. 2)
>
> "On the whole, it may be said that Southerners are, at once, emotionally violent yet physically indolent, provincial yet worldly wise, educated but illogical, genteel yet barbarous." (p. 63)
>
> "If there is a distinguishing feature between the 'Western drawl' and the 'Southern drawl' it is that, where the 'Southern' variety gives the impression of relaxed laziness, the 'Western' suggests cogitation rather than mere indolence." (p. 299)
>
> (from Lewis Herman and Marguerite Herman, *American Dialects: A Manual for Actors, Directors and Writers*. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1947.)

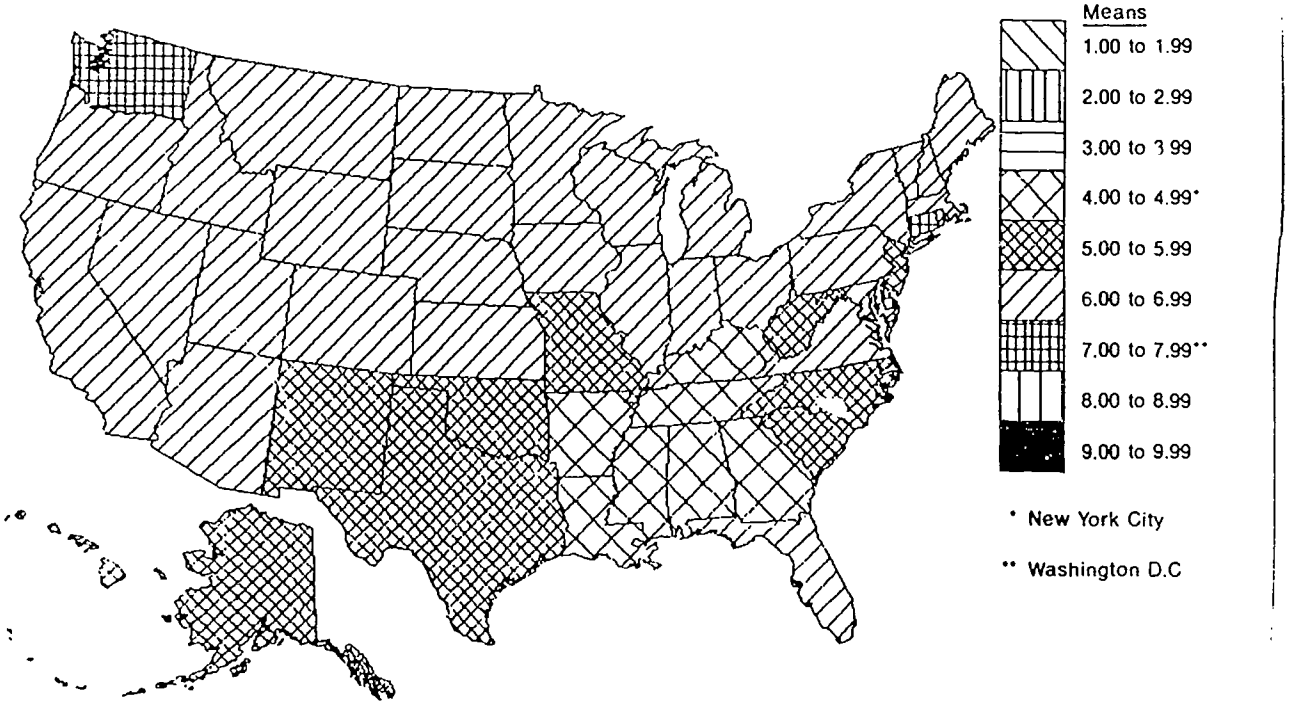
Evidence of a bias against Southern accent comes also from research. In recent years, a number of studies have attempted to discover people's attitudes towards regional, social, and ethnic varieties of English. Typically these studies have involved playing short recordings of unidentified speakers all reading the same passage and then having the subjects in the study make evaluative responses to the speech, including making personality and character inferences. Invariably non-Southerners rate Southern speech and speakers low. A somewhat different approach is represented by the maps which I have reproduced below. Dennis Preston asked two groups of college students—one from Michigan and

one from Southern Indiana—to rate the speech spoken in each of the fifty states plus New York City and Washington, D.C. for "correctness" using a scale of one to ten—ten being the most "correct." He found that both groups of students assigned the lowest ratings to New York City and to Southern speech.

Mean scores for 147 southeastern Michigan respondents' ratings of language 'correctness'.



Mean scores for 123 southern Indiana respondents' ratings of language 'correctness' for the fifty states, New York City, and Washington, D.C. (1.00 = least correct; 10.00 = most correct)



From Dennis Preston, "Standard English Spoken Here: The Geographical Loci of Linguistic Norms," in *Status and Function of Languages and Language Varieties*, ed. Ulrich Ammon (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 332.

Or here's a little experiment that you can try yourself, one which I predict has a very good chance of revealing a negative stereotype of Southern accent. Enlist a good friend to help you. Convince your friend to produce a minute or two of extemporaneous monologue to represent the speech of an uneducated, not very bright person. Listen carefully to the language, ignoring as much as possible the obvious nonstandard grammar and vocabulary and concentrating hard on the sounds that your friend is creating for this ignorant character. I will wager that in many such experiments the person will be using at least some of the Southern pronunciation features which I have listed below:

1. *my, high, time, five, ride,* etc. Words which in "General American" have an upgliding diphthong [aɪ] have a lengthened monophthong [aː] or a "weakened" glide [aə̯].
2. *boy, moist, soil, oil,* etc. Words which in "General American" have an upgliding diphthong [ɔɪ] have a lengthened monophthong [ɔː] or a "weakened" glide [ɔə̯].
3. *cow, out, down, how,* etc. Words which in "General American" have a backgliding diphthong with a low central onset [aʊ] have a fronted onset [æʊ] .

4a. *car, fear, barn, mare, fourth,* etc. Words which in "General American" have a retroflexed *r* following a vowel and preceding a consonant or juncture "lose" *r*, the "loss" actually being either a lengthening of the preceding vowel (e.g., [kaː] = *car*) or a centralized offglide (e.g., [fɪə̯] = *fear*).

4b. *father, other, sister, daughter,* etc. Words which in "General American" have an unstressed central vowel with retroflexion [ɚ] have the unretroflexed vowel [ə] (e.g., [óvə] = *over*).

Now of course it might turn out that I will be wrong. The not-so-bright, not-so-cultured character that your friend creates might have a Brooklyn accent or a Boston accent or a particular ethnic accent. Or perhaps it will be an unidentifiable mish-mash. But I predict that in many cases the choice will be the same as that made by poet and translator Dudley Fitts in his translation of the comedy *Lysistrata* by Aristophenes. As you can see in the excerpt which I have reproduced below, Fitts puts a Southern accent in the mouth of Lampito, a young woman from Sparta who is supposed to come across as a bumpkin from the sticks.

[*Enter* LAMPITO *with women from Sparta*]

LYSISTRATA.
Darling Lampitò,
how pretty you are today! What a nice color!
Goodness, you look as though you could strangle a bull!
LAMPITO.
Ah think Ah could! It's the work-out
in the gym every day; and, of co'se that dance of ahs
where y' kick yo' own tail.[9]
KALONIKE.
What an adorable figure!
LAMPITO.
Lawdy, when y' touch me lahk that,
Ah feel lahk a heifer at the altar!
LYSISTRATA.
And this young lady?
Where is she from?
LAMPITO.
Boiotia. Social-Register type.
LYSISTRATA.
Ah. 'Boiotia of the fertile plain.'

KALONIKE.
And if you look,
you'll find the fertile plain has just been mowed.
LYSISTRATA.
And this lady?
LAMPITO.
Hagh, wahd, handsome. She comes from Korinth.
KALONIKE.
High and wide's the word for it.
LAMPITO.
Which one of you
called this heah meeting, and why?
LYSISTRATA.
I did.

[9]The Spartans were proverbially associated with discipline and the more austere virtues. Lampito here refers to a strenuous dance performed as exercise by Spartan females. The translator renders Spartan speech as backwoods American-Southern because the Athenians condescendingly viewed Spartans as unsophisticated.

LAMPITO.
Well, then, tell us:
What's up?
MYRRHINE.
Yes, darling, what is on your mind, after all?
LYSISTRATA.
I'll tell you.—But first, one little question.
MYRRHINE.
Well?
LYSISTRATA.
It's your husbands. Fathers of your children. Doesn't it bother you
that they're always off with the Army? I'll stake my life,
not one of you has a man in the house this minute!
KALONIKE.
Mine's been in Thrace the last five months, keeping an eye
on that General.[10]
MYRRHINE.
Mine's been in Pylos for seven.
LAMPITO.
And mahn,
whenever he gets a *dis*charge, he goes raht back
with that li'l ole shield of his, and enlists again!
LYSISTRATA.
And not the ghost of a lover to be found!
From the very day the war began—
those Milesians![11]
I could skin them alive!
—I've not seen so much, even,
as one of those leather consolation prizes.—
But there! What's important is: If I've found a way
to end the war, are you with me?

MYRRHINE.
I should say so!
Even if I have to pawn my best dress and
drink up the proceeds.
KALONIKE.
Me, too! Even if they split me
right up the middle, like a flounder.
LAMPITO.
Ah'm shorely with you.
Ah'd crawl up Taÿgetos[12] on mah knees
if that'd bring peace.

From *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, translated by Dudley Fitts (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1954)

Notice that he relies on just a couple of pronunciation features to create "Southern" speech for the rustic, unsophisticated character —that is, [a:] instead of [aɪ] and "dropping" of post-vocalic *r*. For most of us Northerners and Westerners, the presence of just one or two of the "Southern" pronunciations is enough to trigger the stereotype "Southern speech" and for many of us it is a negative stereotype.

I'm not claiming that such stereotypes necessarily reveal a virulent prejudice against Southerners. However, clear examples of intolerance and insensitivity are not hard to find. Over the years that I have been interested in

dialects, I've had many Southerners tell me tales of having been severely teased or insulted about their accent, both as children and adults; or about having been sent to speech therapy to have their pronunciation "corrected"; or about having been denied positions, usually ones involving public contact, because the employer would not want to be represented by someone who sounded like that, even though the accent was standard educated Southern English. And sometimes these things happened in the South itself.

Such insensitivity and discrimination should of course be a concern. However, perhaps even more important, because more subtle and pervasive, are the seemingly innocuous reactions such as these:

a. "[headline] **Drawling sheriff describes suspect** A drawling East Texas sheriff told a court hearing today that . . ." (Associated Press, *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*)

b. " . . . from a man [Gov. Steve Cowper] who is known to torture the English language with his southern drawl." (Alaska Public Radio Network reporter)

c. "Lee Thomas, national administrator for the federal Environmental Protection Agency, gave high marks today to Fairbanks' automobile emission and inspection program . . . Thomas hails from North Carolina and speaks with a southern accent." (*Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*)

d. "At 29, this soft-spoken sprite [Beth Henley] from Jackson [Mississippi] has more hits percolating than Neil Simon put together. . . . Henley says in a molasses drawl just slightly diluted by her years in Los Angeles, 'I was . . .'" (*Time*)

e. "Welcome to Herrin, a Midwestern town with a Southern twang and an undisguised lust for up to 200 new Maytag jobs that Newton, Ia., would like to have."(*Des Moines Register*)

These are typical of the ways in which Southern accent is highlighted: the gentle, friendly teasing, the gratuitous noticing and commenting on, the barely suppressed bemusement, the not taking quite seriously or listening fully to *what* is being said because of *how* it is being said. These and similar reactions constantly repeated create the environment in which one way of speaking is assumed as the norm, the given, the background, the expectable, the unmarked, while accents which are somewhat different—especially Southern, but also Eastern New England—stand out, are foregrounded, are the marked, as opposed

to the speech of the observers, which are assumed to be the language itself, not an accent at all.

I think we must acknowledge that to some extent social class and race are implicated in the negative stereotype of Southern accent. Since the 1930s, large numbers of poor blacks from the deep South and poor whites from the Upper South have migrated to Northern and Western cities, often concentrating heavily in particular neighborhoods. Thus, large islands of Southern speech have been transplanted in the midst of General American and have been maintained as a result of social isolation. The language of these peoples and their descendents has been the primary—perhaps only—direct contact with Southern dialects and accents for many Northerners and Westerners. As a result, their perceptual templates of Southern speech—and especially their attitudes towards it—are not shaped by exposure to the full range of Southern varieties functioning in the native setting. If they had met Southern speech in the South, it would have been obvious that the speech of all social classes and all races has much in common. So that, for example, on native ground, the pronunciations [æʊ] and [a:] and r-losing are not social markers; they don't indicate nonstandard speech. They are features of the accents of all social groups. However, when carried to Chicago and Detroit and Los Angeles in the speech of poor, lesser educated Southerners, these features of standard Southern accent stand out in the new linguistic context just as sharply and just as negatively as *ain't* and double negatives and other nonstandard features which in fact are nonstandard in the South also. In other words, transplanted regional features can become nonstandard social markers in the new environment.

Also reinforcing the negative stereotype of Southern accent are the echoes that it has for many people of Southern white racism. During the 1960s, radio and television exposed us to the voices of unreconstructed racists like Bull Conner, Lester Maddox, George Wallace and Orville Fabus. The Southern accent that we heard on the news every day was almost entirely wrapped around attitudes and ideas that we found loathsome. And contemporary portrayals of that era let us hear those same accents expressing racial prejudice—for example, in movies such as *Mississippi Burning* and in TV programs such as the currently popular PBS series *I'll Fly Away*. While it is undoubtedly true that our image of the "New South" is much more positive, there still are phenoms like David Duke or old reliables like Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmod giving us examples of Southern accent in association with racism.

The negative perception of Southern accent together with the widespread prestige of the General American accent are, I believe, having an effect in the South itself. I can't claim firsthand knowledge, but from the reports I read and from hearing Southern speech in news and public affairs broadcasting, there appears to me to be a leveling, a "smoothing" of several of the stereotypical features of Southern accent. Younger, educated, urban Southern voices are using less and less *r*-dropping, are closer to [au] rather than [æu], and are full gliding [aɪ] rather than [aː]. For example, when I hear interviews with the movers and shakers of Atlanta, such as those organizing for the summer Olympics, I wonder if Atlanta has moved several hundred miles north. It sounds a lot closer to northern Kentucky or southern Ohio than to Jimmy Carter's Plains, Georgia.

A similar shift towards General American seems to be occurring in Eastern New England, where the sharp distinctiveness of *r*-dropping and the so-called "broad *a*" (as in *half, calf, pass* etc.) is less noticeable in younger speakers. For example, Senator John Kerry is a much weaker fit to the stereotype of Boston accent than was Senator John Kennedy or House Speaker Tip O'Niel. And in New York City, the *r*-dropping that characterized the traditional standard accent has become so stigmatized that it has virtually disappeared from younger educated New York City speech.

If I am correct that there is a long-term trend toward a more or less uniform accent among the educated of all regions—that is, a national standard of pronunciation—then the decline of standard regional dialects in the U.S. will be complete. Already the syntax and morphology are virtually uniform. And vocabulary differences are largely restricted to terms for regional phenomena. In the future the prominent dialect differences in the U.S. will correlate with social class. For if the language of the educated is the same, then our primary experience with dialect variation will be the speech of the lower classes—speech which therefore is judged nonstandard. There will certainly be regionally distributed features, including some of the pronunciations which I have identified today. However, for the most part, they will be associated with lower socioeconomic status. Dialect differences, then, will be even more clearly perceived, not as neutral, but as wrong, as deviant language, as deprived language, etc. The negative stereotypes will have come true.

Can anything be done to change this unappealing prospect? Well, I suppose we could require that everyone take a course in linguistic diversity—a course in which linguists would expound on the nature of language and on the

normalcy of dialectal variation. Effective as this might be, I see some practical problems in implementing it. Therefore, the only other possibility that I can think of is to foster a popular movement to counteract the negative sterotypes of dialect and accent, a consciousness raising program which would use social pressure to change attitudes and behaviors. In short, I propose a new addition to the doctrine of political correctness. I hereby announce a new -ism to be on the alert for. I call it "accentism." From now on it is—or at least should be—politically incorrect to discriminate against the differently accented or to harbor—even unconsciously—feelings of superiority about one's own speech.

So, assuming that in this matter your heart is pure—or can be purified—please join me in a mission to raise awareness of this problem, especially the consciousnesses of speakers of General American accent. I urge this not only because the cause is noble and correct, but also in the fond hope that we might slow the slide towards General American. For I cherish linguistic diversity of all kinds. And in far too many places in the world today, language variety is declining. We see languages going extinct, dialects being abandoned, and accents losing prestige. And while I can't honestly argue that preserving linguistic diversity is as urgent as preserving biological diversity, I do believe that the richness of life is diminished when unique expressions of human culture are lost. Over the long run, the trend toward cultural homogeneity—including linguistic uniformity—probably can't be stopped. But I can't see that it is necessary or beneficial, and therefore I don't give my consent. I urge you not to either. So, go forth and fight accentism wherever you meet it, and be especially kind to Southern accents.