



The Varieties of American English

A Handbook

THE VARIETIES OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

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FOREWORD

This handbook is intended to supplement the three-part videotape series Varieties of American English, which consists of (1) Regional Dialects, (2) Social and Specialized Groups, and (3) Stylistic Differences. The series is available on 16-mm film as well as in its original videotape form, but, for the sake of brevity, it will be referred to here as a VTR (videotape recording) only.

This handbook has been prepared primarily for teacher trainers who have selected one or more of these VTRs for use in seminar, workshop, or classroom presentation. Its independent use by teachers of English, advanced learners of English, and even linguists, sociolinguists, and dialectologists is not precluded; however, persons well trained in linguistics will want to consult the anthology Varieties of American English (prepared for this same series) for more thorough discussion of the topics treated here.

An accompanying sound tape repeats examples from the VTRs and provides further samples for analysis.

This entire series was prepared for and is distributed by the International Communications Agency (ICA) of the United States.

KEY TO SOUND TAPE

Tape Sample

1. Julius Caesar, selection read in Early Modern English ("Shakespearean" English), Modern British English, and Modern American English.
2. President Gerald Ford (Northern), Roslyn Carter (Southern), President John Kennedy (New England), Catfish Hunter (South Midland), John Glenn (North Midland), and Professor Richard Morris (New York City), from VTR I.
3. Southern New England, South Midland, North Midland, and New York City, comparing the use of (a) post-vocalic /r/; (b) /aI/; (c) /aU/; (d) /a/ versus /ɔ/; and (e) /ɛ/ versus /I/ before nasal consonants, from VTR I.
4. Scrambled sentence illustrating grammatical features of the six dialect areas represented in VTR I, from VTR I.
5. Find, ten, brought, now, star, read by representatives of the six dialect areas presented in VTR I.
6. Further examples of the six dialects presented in VTR I.
7. Further examples of the six dialects presented in VTR I.
8. Standard and nonstandard English, from VTR II.
9. Shifts from standard to nonstandard, from VTR II.
10. Sex roles and language, from VTR II.
11. Age determined speech, from VTR II.
12. Decreolization, from VTR II.
13. Grammatical constructions in American Black English.
14. Specialized group messages, from VTR II.
15. Guarded messages, from VTR II.
16. Narrator's four style introduction to VTR III, from VTR III.
17. Five styles of "goodbye," from VTR III.
18. Frozen style samples, from VTR III.

19. Formal style samples, from VTR III.
20. Consultative style samples, from VTR III.
21. Casual style samples, from VTR III.
22. Intimate style samples, from VTR III.
23. Further samples of the five styles.

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REGIONAL DIALECTS (VTR I)

Dialect Variation

Every language that has spread geographically has produced varieties called dialects. Perhaps the most important difference between the linguist's and non-linguist's understanding of dialect lies in the unwillingness of the professional linguist to assign such labels as "incorrect," "limited," "primitive," "slovenly," or "ugly" to any language or variety of language, including regional dialects. Although linguists recognize that at certain periods in the history of a language one dialect may gain considerable influence over others as a language becomes standardized (through commerce, writing, literature, education, and other forces), they also believe that all languages and varieties of languages have equal status as regards grammatical and phonological complexity, beauty and aesthetic potential, and congruity to the culture that supports them for general and complex communication purposes.

In some areas the dialect that leads in the development of the standard language may continue to have considerable prestige in later years. In British English, for example, the variety of Southern British English that was most involved in the standardization of English in the Middle Ages still impresses many as the "best" English (though it has changed much in a half century). The modern variety of this most prestigious variety is often referred to as Oxford or BBC or the King's or Queen's English.

Linguists refer to the phonological aspects of this variety as RP (received pronunciation). However, it is interesting to note that this variety is no longer a purely regional dialect; it is now a more widely spread variety of British English, viewed as most prestigious and by many non-linguists as most "correct." Oddly enough, what began as a regional or geographical subdivision of British English appears now to be the natural variety of no native speaker of any region. It is the acquired variety of announcers, students of the fashionable public schools and most influential universities, and those to whom language prestige means a great deal.

Even though the RP variety of British English has a regional background, we are not primarily concerned with the specific historical development of a prestige variety. American English has no such regionally associated prestige, and modern RP (at least in its phonology) shows regional variation. (Of course if RP refers to pronunciation alone it could show variation only in phonology, but many have come to associate the entire range of prestigious, standard forms [phonological, grammatical, lexical] with the abbreviation RP.) Since we are primarily concerned with American English here, we shall consider RP (and other varieties of British English) only to the extent that they have influenced the development of the regional varieties of American English.

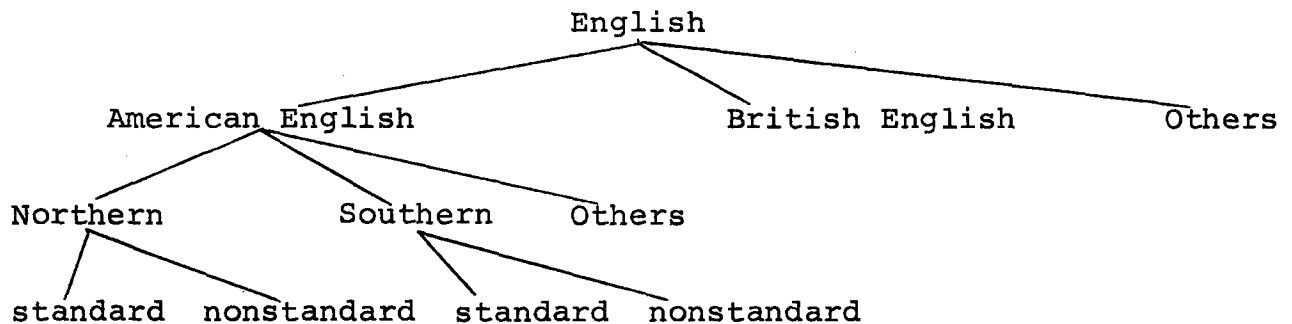
We shall not overlook the fact, however, that even in American English geographical varieties have aroused popular beliefs concerning their correctness and/or prestige. None is so well

established, however, as the corresponding belief about RP.

We will, in fact, maintain that every regional variety discussed in this first VTR is representative of standard American English. In our opinion a dialect is not a language variety to be identified as standard or nonstandard; each dialect has both standard and nonstandard sub-varieties. In this first VTR we are concerned exclusively with several representative, standard, regional varieties of American English (or, as we would call them, dialects).

Material from the VTR*

The English language has several important world subdivisions or varieties. Only British and American are shown here [see below], but Canadian, Australian, South African, and others might have been mentioned.



*Material from the VTR is duplicated here and in the accompanying sound tape for convenience.

At a level just below these world varieties are some of the dialectal subdivisions of American English. Here, for example, we indicate the Northern and Southern varieties of American English, though others might have been listed.

But notice that underneath each one of these dialect areas we have made a division into standard and nonstandard. That is, every dialect has a standard and nonstandard variety. A dialect is not, in itself, standard or nonstandard. We impose no value judgment on the varieties of language we label "dialect."

Suggestions for Discussion and Study

For this section discussion of the notions dialect and standard will be most profitable. Many who see the VTR may still feel that a language has a standard ("correct") variety (which they will not regard as a dialect) and a number of nonstandard ("incorrect") dialects. Some will doubtless have the well-known American attitude (not at all monopolized): "Well, we don't really speak a dialect around here, you know; now if you go over to Newburg or way over towards Plattsville; well now, they really sound odd out there. But right here in Mud Flats, I reckon I couldn't really say I knew anybody spoke a dialect." Perhaps reference to those sections of the VTR that contain examples of well-known educated Americans speaking different dialects will help overcome the attitude that speakers of a standard are not dialect speakers. (Tape sample #2 might be used in connection with this discussion.) You may wish to raise the question of a possible contrast between the American situation (in which

numerous regional dialects support both standard and nonstandard varieties in every case) and the local linguistic situation.

Historical Backgrounds of American English

Many of the differences among the varieties of American English spring directly from differences already present in the parent variety--British English. Some characteristics of American English may be more conservative than revolutionary. For example, some aspects of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British English that underwent subsequent change in the British Isles remained the same in the New World. Although conservatism may account for some retained features, the eventual loss of contact between America and England--even between England and her traditionally close colonies of New England and Virginia--helped bring about distinctively American speechways. The middle colonies, Pennsylvania in particular, had ethnic and religious differences between them and the mother country much greater than differences between the areas to the north and south and Great Britain. These same middle colonies also supported a rapidly growing middle class which became most influential in political as well as business affairs; in contrast, the New England colonies were much influenced by religious leadership, and the southern colonies were most often led by aristocratic families. All these factors led to the eventual distance that developed between British and American English.

Suggestions for Discussion and Study

Listen to tape sample #1 on the accompanying audio tape. Three readers perform a short selection from Shakespeare's

Julius Caesar. The first offers an imitation of seventeenth-century ("Shakespearean") English; the second is Modern Southern British (RP); and the third is North Midland American. Compare these three varieties. One realization that should come from this exercise is that American English is just as close to seventeenth-century British English as Modern British English is--perhaps closer.

Discuss whether or not Americans and Englishmen speak the same language. (You will need to come to some working definition of "language"--as opposed to "variety," "dialect," and so on.) Perhaps some will be familiar with the strong opinion on this question held by H. L. Mencken, the American journalist, whose most famous work--The American Language--reflects his point of view in the title. (Mencken's work is available in three volumes: The American Language, fourth edition, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1936; The American Language: Supplement I, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945; and The American Language: Supplement II, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948; all three volumes are recently reprinted. A handier form is the one volume abridged edition by Raven I. McDavid, Jr. and David W. Maurer, The American Language, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971. This abridged edition selects material from the original and its supplements and adds newer material. All four volumes contain a wealth of information and speculation on American English in addition to the discussion of its relation to British English.) A more sober view of the differences between British and American English came from radio

conversations between Albert H. Marckwardt and Randolph Quirk held over BBC and the Voice of America in the early 1960s.

(A Common Language: British and American English, copyright, The British Broadcasting Corporation, 1964; reprinted by English Teaching Division, Information Center Service, Washington, D.C.: United States Information Agency, 1965). A recent survey of the differences between British and American English, prepared especially for teachers of English as a second or foreign language, is Karol Janicki's Elements of British and American English, Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1977.

Non-English Contributions to American English

The New World brought immigrants from so many language families and groups that many aspects of American English are like the population of the country--a mixture of many tongues. Of course the new environment, with its physical, religious, and political differences, required new labels or modification of old ones. A great variety of languages contributed their resources to this project, and, to this day, American English has continued its hospitality to items from other languages.

Material from the VTR

Dutch: Yankee, Bowery, kill (creek).

American Indian languages: hickory, catalpa, pecan, chipmunk, raccoon, skunk, opossum, woodchuck, muskellunge, teepee, wigwam, totem, powwow, podunk.

French: prairie, lacrosse, portage, calumet.

American Indian languages through French: toboggan, bayou, caribou.

African languages: cooter (turtle), goober (peanut), banjo, boogie-woogie, voodoo, jazz.

Spanish: mesa, arroyo, bronco, ranch, lasso, sombrero, chaps, rodeo.

Suggestions for Discussion and Study

Study the examples provided above and the supplementary items listed below. Try to explain why certain sections of the vocabulary are influenced by particular languages.

Swedish: lutfisk (a fish delicacy), lingnon (a berry), lefse (a potato pancake), lag (an association of Swedes from the same province), smorgasbord.

Japanese: tycoon, jujitsu, banzai, kamikaze, honcho (important person, leader), hara-kiri.

Yiddish: bagel, mashuggah (crazy), schnorrer (a beggar), mazel tof (congratulations, good luck), nash (snack), goy (a non-Jew), zaftig (attractive, plump woman), schmo (a stupid person), schmaltz (excessively sentimental or romantic, in bad taste, "corny").

Italian: macaroni, ravioli, spaghetti, pizza, espresso, policy (a form of gambling):

Czech: koláč (yeast bread filled with jam), povidla (a prune marmalade), buchta (a coffeecake), počkej (wait, hold on); sokol (literally, a falcon, but used to designate an athletic association).

An exercise which focuses on the contribution of non-English languages to American place-names (in this case, in the state of Michigan) is in Roger W. Shuy, Discovering American Dialects, Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967, pp. 49-50.

The discussion suggested earlier (on the possibility of separate language status for British and American English) has been most recently raised by the linguist J. L. Dillard in his book All-American English, New York: Random House, Inc., 1975. Dillard argues that American English, through its extensive contact with other languages, has gone through something like a "creolizing" process and has drifted so far from the parent variety as to be another language. Extensive discussion of this point may be reserved until the second VTR is discussed (in which "pidgin" and "creole" are more carefully defined). Here, however, discussion of how much foreign influence a variety can tolerate before its status is changed should be worthwhile. Those who argue this point strongly on the basis of the "purity" of the parent variety (British English, in this discussion) need to be reminded of the Norman invasion and the immense influence romance language forms had on the English of that period. A discussion of foreign words in English in general may be found in Mary S. Serjeantson, A History of Foreign Words in English, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1935. Interesting early data on foreign loans in English (before the rise of American English) is presented in Otto Jespersen, Growth and Structure of the English Language, ninth

edition, Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., n.d.

Major Dialects of American English

Dialect differentiation along the East Coast of the United States is finely graded, the result of mixing patterns of early immigration and difficulty in travel and communication between cities in colonial times (see Map I). Further west dialect differences are much further apart, illustrating the mixing of the various East Coast varieties as people moved west. The major migration routes into the west (the Great Lakes, the Ohio River, the Cumberland Gap, and the southern edge of the Appalachians [see Map II]) are primarily responsible for the mingling of many, distinct eastern varieties into four large mid-America dialects--the Northern, North Midland, South Midland, and Southern.

Material from the VTR

Tape sample #2 repeats unanalyzed samples of Northern, Southern, North Midland, Eastern New England, South Midland, and New York City speech. In the VTR particular attention was called to the differences in post-vocalic /r/, the /aI/ and /aU/ diphthongs, /a/ versus /ɔ/, and the vowel /ɛ/ before /m/ and /n/.

Tape sample #3 compares specific features from the Northern, Southern, New England, South Midland, North Midland, and New York City areas. The first comparison concerns the presence or absence of post-vocalic /r/ in the word car. The Southern, New England, and New York City speakers lack /r/. The second comparison involves the realization of the diphthong /aI/ in the word time.