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EXPLORING THE GEOGRAPHICAL DIALECTS OF ENGLISH

John H. Bushman

Language-study should be an integral part of the English curriculum. If students are aware of the language they speak and know the linguistic choices available to them, then they will be able to participate more fully in the community in which they learn, play, and make a living. In order to do this, teachers should design a curriculum giving students the opportunity to explore the nature and structure of language, including the usage conventions of "Standard English" as well as other varieties of English. They should explore language heritage, geographical and social dialects, semantics, and the "silent language" as well. All of these areas offer students vast resources for study and growth, a chance to broaden their linguistic repertoire and, as a result, help them to exert an influence on the community in which they live.

One of the major language areas open for exploration by students is geographical dialects. In our pluralistic society, a wide variety of languages and dialects are spoken daily. Even though each person is likely to have a number of dialects, the concept of "dialect" is widely misunderstood. Many people believe that dialect is a corruption of the standard language rather than a valid variation. It is important, then, for students to become aware of and appreciate the variety of dialects as valid forms of language use.

Generally, there are three dialect regions in the United States: northern, southern, and midland. Because of improved communications and extensive travel, these boundaries are not as clearly defined as they used to be. Still, with continued emphasis on language and language variety, many people have felt less pressure to conform, and thus feel more comfortable using their native dialect. Within each region, there are many dialect pockets. For example, within the northern area, there exist dialects of northeastern New England, southeastern New England, southwestern New England, New

York City, the Hudson Valley, western Vermont, and upstate New York. Of course, there are even smaller pockets within each of those areas.

Many reasons account for these dialect differences: the language that came to this country from England, the influences that it received from other languages after arriving in this country, the western migration of the colonists, and the influence of physical geography.

Settlers from England came from many areas, bringing with them a variety of linguistic backgrounds and a broad range of dialects. When they came to America, they brought with them the language peculiarities of the Southern, Midland, or Northern dialect areas of the mother country. These settlers, with their variety of language habits, influenced each other as they traveled together across the ocean, as well as after they arrived on American soil. Their dialects served as the foundation of American English.

The language in all of its varieties continued to be influenced by many sources. Certainly at the forefront in our classroom discussions of these matters should be the influence of the native Americans as well as people from other countries who either were already in this country or would soon arrive. The Indian influence is noticed throughout the English language. Not only is the influence felt in names of rivers, mountains, cities, and states but also in other areas as well. A few examples include the words "hickory," "pecan," "succotash," "squaw," "tomahawk," "tepee," and "toboggan."

Each of the nations whose people came to America also left some traces on the English vocabulary. For example, the Dutch left us "cole-slaw," "cookies," and "waffles;" the French gave us "portage," "prairie," and "goblet;" and the Spanish contributed "alligator" and "mosquito." This immigration during the nineteenth century of people from many different lands made a substantial difference in the English language in general and the various dialects in particular.

The western migration of the colonists contributed to the differences as well. The language changed as people moved from one area to another and as colonists came in contact with these various influences. The general shift was east to west. Therefore, dialect boundaries tend to run horizontally rather than vertically.

Physical geography influenced the nature of the language, too. Mountains, rivers, deserts, and marshes often blocked the spread of different

words and expressions by inhibiting physical travel by dialect users. This influence does not have such an effect now, but played an important role in the early establishment of the various dialects. A good example is the Connecticut River, which separates "pahk the cah" from "park the car" and serves as the natural boundary between Vermont and New Hampshire. This river also serves as the major dividing point between the eastern New England and the Vermont, upstate New York dialect areas. Certainly, other natural boundaries had an effect: Appalachian Mountains, the Rockies, Mississippi River.

The differences among the dialect regions usually occur in three general areas: vocabulary, sound, and syntax. The following gives a brief example:

	<u>Northern</u>	<u>Southern</u>	<u>Midland</u>
vocabulary	string beans	snap beans	greenbeans
	faucet	spicket	spicket
		spigot	spigot
	angleworm	fishworm	fishing worm
	chipmunk	ground squirrel	ground squirrel
	skunk	polecat	woodpussy, skunk
	bucketpail	pail	pail
	bag	poke	sack
sound	ahnt (aunt)	ant (aunt)	ant (aunt)
	fahg (fog)	fawg (fog)	fawg (fog)
	wawsh (wash)	wawrsh (wash)	wawrsh (wash)
	grisi (greasy)	grizi (greasy)	grizi (greasy)
syntax	A quarter to six	A quarter 'till six	A quarter 'till six
	sick to the stomach	sick at the stomach	sick at,in,of, to the stomach
	the dog wants to go out	the dog wants to go out	the dog wants out
	catch a cold	take a cold	take a cold

The study of geographical dialects arouses a great deal of enthusiasm in the students as they have the opportunity to investigate their own dialects. They begin to notice how their dialects are different from others

in their neighborhood, school, community, state and nation. I believe, too, that as students begin to learn more about each other's language differences, they begin to learn more about each person's uniqueness. As a result, there may be more tolerance toward the differences found among people. An important concept to teach is that language difference is not language inferiority.

To know this subject matter is important, but to experience the exploration of dialect study is even better. The following activities help students to move into the realm of linguistic investigation as they study their own language patterns as well as those of others':

Activity 1

There are many words and phrases that are frequently expressed in a variety of ways in different dialect sections of the country. Have students go through a list indicating just what they do say. Discuss the regional varieties found in the classroom. For example: What do you call

1. Apple and Pastry Dessert Baked in a Deep Dish: apple cobbler, apple dowdy, apple pan dowdy, apple slump, deep-dish apple pie, pot pie, bird's nest, deep apple pie.
2. Cornmeal Bread Baked in Large Cakes: corn bread, Johnny cake, corn pone, pone, spoon bread, butter bread, hoe cake, corn dodger, corn duffy, cracklin bread.
3. Round Confection with Hole in the Center: doughnuts, crullers, fried-cakes, fat-cakes, raised doughnuts, nig doughnuts, nut cakes.
4. Corn served on the Cob: sweet corn, sugar corn, mutton corn, green corn, roasting ears, corn-on-the-cob.
5. Round Flat Cakes, Fried on a Griddle: pancakes, griddlecakes, batter cakes, hot cakes, flannel cakes, flap jacks, slap jacks.
6. Stone of a Peach: stone, pit, seed, kernel.
7. Food Eaten Between Regular Meals: a bite, snack, a piece, piece meal, lunch.
8. Green Leafy Cover of an Ear of Corn: cap, husk, shuck.
9. Piece of Furniture with Drawers: chest of drawers, bureau, chifferobe, chiffonier.

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10. Center of County Government: county seat, county capital, shire town, county site, parish seat.
11. Devices at Edge of Roof to Carry off Rain: eave troughs, eaves, gutters, spouts, canals, water troughs.
12. Water Device Over Sink: faucet, tap, spicket, spigot, hydrant.
13. Pan for Frying: frying pan, fry pan, spider, skillet.
14. Paper Container for Carrying Groceries: sack, bag, poke, tote.
15. A Carbonated Beverage: soda, pop, Coke, tonic.

Activity 2

As a follow-up to the previous activity, have students create a dialect observation sheet using some or all of the items in activity 1. Students should use this sheet to survey dialect differences in their community. Have students select informants who can give them a range in age and education; an urban/rural balance; information on their residences, both past and present; and some information on their occupations. Discuss with students the results. As a follow up, have students investigate the settlement of their community: where did people come from, how did they travel to this community, what changes have occurred between the present population and the early settlers?

Activity 3

Students frequently enjoy "first hand data" in their dialect study. Have them record a passage which includes key words and experiences and send it to another school in a different dialect area. This is not as difficult as it may seem. Simply choose a community from a map and send a letter of inquiry about the project to the English teacher of that community's junior or senior high school. Exchange the recorded passages and discuss them.

Activity 4

There are many authors who use dialects in their writings. Have students read some of the following authors and investigate their use of

dialects:

Patterson Greene	Ernest Hemingway
Langston Hughes	Ring Lardner
James Weldon Johnson	Damon Runyon
George Elliot	J.D. Salinger
Charles Dickens	John Steinbeck
Willa Cather	Jesse Stuart
Ole Rolvaag	Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings
Mark Twain	Jessamyn West

Activity 5

There are media available to help in the study of dialects. Commercially published records/tapes can be helpful. A few examples:

American Speech Dialects - Texas Educational Agency
Bert and I and Other Stories from Down East - Bryan & Dodge
American Tongues (video tape) - Center for New American Media
USA Dialect Tape Center - University of South Alabama, Mobile
The Story of English - The PBS series (9 parts)

Teachers may use these and other media to supplement the teaching of dialects.

Activity 6

On a map of the United States have students indicate the general boundaries of the dialect areas. In each area they should indicate with pictures, key words, or phonetic spellings the regional differences.

Activity 7

Have students create a collage of one of the dialect areas in which they include a variety of examples to represent the major regional characteristics: vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation. A good example of a study of one dialect area is found in the Fall, 1988 (Vol. 38, No. 2) issue of the *Virginia English Bulletin* on the theme of "Southern Appalachian - Culture with Classroom."

Activity 8

Have students work in small groups and investigate the following topics, eventually showing how the selected factors relate to dialect study:

- a. settlement history of the country
- b. population shift from East to West
- c. influence of cities as cultural and economic centers
- d. physical geography and economic patterns of specific locations.

Activity 9

Have students interview people who speak dialects different from their own. Have them list for class presentation at least five items that are different.

Activity 10

After students have had some introductory material concerning the various dialect regions of the U.S., divide the class into groups of five or six. Tell each group that they are to represent a particular dialect found in the U.S. The groups are to do research in their dialects, making note of words and expressions particular to each dialect. They should also be aware of pronunciation and speech patterns and should be able to supply records or tapes containing regional examples.

When research has been completed, have each group prepare a short skit to be presented to the entire class. In the skit a Welcome Committee

is to greet a new member of the community explaining to that person everything there is to know about the area he has just moved into. Some topics to consider: wildlife, food and drink, weather, politics, furniture, and health conditions. If students are really at home with their dialects, an improvisation might work better than the writing of an actual script.

To study dialects, students are, indeed, able to discover the joy and fascination found in the American language. Seeing and hearing the language variations of people who live in New Hampshire, Virginia, Georgia, Texas, Kansas, Colorado, the Ozarks of Missouri, Michigan, or many other parts of this country help to show young people that while we have one language to communicate our thoughts and feelings, we engage in that process of communication by making choices from a wide variety of lexical, oral/aural, and syntactic options appropriate to the linguistic group of people to which we belong and to whom we are trying to communicate. Perhaps the following migratory worker's dialogue from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* sums up what the message is:

"Ever'body says words different," said Ivy. "Arkansas folks says 'em different, and Oklahomy folks says 'em different. And we seen a lady from Massachusetts an' she said 'em differentest of all. Couldn't hardly make out what she was sayin'."

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