Lecture 12
American English Development Of Regional Speech Patterns

American English is a vibrant and diverse variety of the English language, shaped by centuries of historical, social, and cultural influences. From its origins in the 17th century, English in North America evolved in ways distinct from British English due to geographic separation, settlement patterns, and contact with other languages. The migration of settlers from different regions of Britain, the influence of African slaves, Native American languages, and later waves of European immigrants, all contributed to the development of unique linguistic features across the country.

As populations spread westward and communities became regionally isolated, distinct regional dialects and speech patterns emerged, reflecting both local culture and historical circumstances. These regional varieties differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, and intonation, creating a rich mosaic of American English speech. While mass media, education, and mobility have encouraged some degree of standardization, regional differences remain strong markers of identity, social background, and cultural heritage.

The study of regional speech patterns in American English provides insights into linguistic evolution, social dynamics, and cultural history, revealing how language adapts to new environments while maintaining continuity with its historical roots. Understanding these patterns is crucial for appreciating the complexity and diversity of American English in both spoken and written forms.

The Northern speech band includes New England and the northernmost tier of states. Boston served as the focus of the New England settlement area, from Rhode Island north to Maine, but mountains hindered direct overland settlement to the west. New England speech came to leave out the r sound after vowels, as also occurred in British English, and to pronounce the vowels of aunt, half, and law much like the vowel in calm.

Even settlers who shared goal of "becoming an American" did not always share American English in exactly the same form. People tend to talk like the people they talk to, and so American English developed regional varieties. These varieties match the main ports of entry and follow the typical paths of settlement that started in each port. According to American linguist Hans Kurath, three broad east-west bands—North, Midland, and South— show a link between settlement and speech patterns. These bands reach as far as the Mississippi River but do not cross it, because settlement of the West was more mixed.

New York City, also in the Northern speech band, developed speech habits different from those of many other northern regions, in ways made famous by the city's prominence in the media. These differences include the lack of the r sound after vowels, occasional substitution of a t sound for a th sound, and pronunciation of words with an oi sound that others pronounce with an er sound. All of these combine in the pronunciation toity-toid for thirty-third.

The first English-speaking settlers in the Inland Northern region traveled through Connecticut to get to upstate New York. Later, the Hudson River and the Erie Canal opened up settlement for the entire Inland Northern region via the Great Lakes. Inland Northern speakers do pronounce r after vowels.

The Midland region has one city as its focus, Philadelphia, but two different settlement pathways. Settlers could move west from Philadelphia through southern Pennsylvania to Ohio and Indiana; this path created the North Midland area, whose inhabitants share linguistic features with the Northern region. Settlers could also proceed southwest through the Shenandoah Valley, creating the South Midland region, where people share linguistic features with the Southern region. Midland speakers from both pathways pronounce r after vowels.

The Southern region has two focal areas—the Virginia plantation area around Richmond and the Charleston plantation area in South Carolina and Georgia—but only one main path of settlement. This main thrust of Southern settlement went into areas suitable for plantations, extending as far as eastern Texas. Southern speakers do not pronounce r after vowels. African Americans worked on plantations and learned Southern American English, acquiring many other Southern linguistic features.

Settlement west of the Mississippi River was more mixed than settlement through the regular pathways in the East, and eastern regional features were leveled in the West just as the speech of people from different parts of England had been leveled in the colonies. Western American English is not all the same, however, because of varying amounts of influence from Spanish residents and because the plains and Western states were settled by different proportions of Northerners, Midlanders, and Southerners. The Pacific Northwest and northern California gained more Northerners and North Midlanders, while the Southwest and the southern plains received more settlement from the South and South Midland.

American English Modern Variation In American English

The regional speech patterns that developed during the settlement of the United States are still present and are still important aspects of American English. However, social circumstances have changed in the 20th century. Large-scale immigration and initial settlement have given way to movements between established regions of the country, and people who stay in one area develop local speech patterns. These social conditions lead, paradoxically, both to wider use of a spoken standard American English and to greater variety in local speech types. Some scholars believe that local accents in American cities differ more now than ever before.

This paradox occurs because people talk differently depending on whom they are talking to and on the circumstances of the conversation. For instance, people who work together in different kinds of jobs have special words for their jobs: lawyers know legal language, doctors know medical terms, and factory workers know the right terms to describe the products they make and the processes used to make them. Such job-related language not only has special purposes, it also identifies the user as somebody who knows the job. For example, someone who cannot use legal language convincingly is

probably not a lawyer. Language for particular needs and for identification occurs in connection not only with jobs but also with social groups—groups formed by region, gender, ethnic affiliation, age, or other criteria.

American English. The Spoken Standard. Regional and Social Variation

American English has never had a strict spoken standard that is considered "correct," as most European languages have. Today the spoken standard in American English is best defined as the relative absence of characteristics—such as word choice or pronunciation—that might identify the speaker as coming from a particular region or social group. National newscasters and other broadcast personalities often adopt this speech type in public, as do many Americans in formal settings such as schools, courts, and boardrooms. In general the more someone has gone to school, the better the person's command of American English without regional and social characteristics. This occurs largely because the written American English taught in schoolbooks does not include many regional or social features. This association does not mean that the spoken standard is more correct than speech with regional or social characteristics. However, standard language is usually more appropriate in formal situations because people have come to expect it on those occasions.

Outside of schools and other formal situations, regional and social variations thrive in American English. The majority of Americans now live in urban and suburban communities instead of on isolated farms, and this change in residence patterns encourages development of informal speech types, each one of which is called a vernacular. Vernaculars develop especially in neighborhoods where people have a great deal of daily contact, but they also develop more broadly according to regional and social patterns of contact. Old regional words sometimes fade, but new ones take their place in regional vernaculars.

While regional and social background certainly affects people's speech, background does not prevent anyone from learning either the spoken standard or aspects of other regional and social varieties. When adults move to a new region, they typically do not pick up all the characteristics of speech in the new area. Young children, however, commonly learn to sound more like natives. The result is a mixture of speakers with different regional and social backgrounds in nearly every community. Spoken standard American English is also used in nearly every community. Some commentators predict the loss of regional and social characteristics because everyone hears spoken standard speech on radio and television. However, passive exposure to the media will not outweigh the personal contact that occurs within neighborhoods and social groups and through regional travel. This contact strongly shapes regional and social varieties of speech.

The pronunciation of American English is also changing, but often in different ways in different vernaculars. American sociolinguist William Labov has suggested three sets of changes in pronunciation, each set appropriate to a different vernacular.
One pattern of change affects Northern cities: the vowel of wrought is often pronounced more like the one in rot; in turn, the vowel in rot is pronounced more like the one in rat;

and the vowel in rat is pronounced more like the one in Rhett. Another pattern of change is occurring among South Midland and Southern speakers: the vowel of red is often pronounced more like the one in raid; in turn, the vowel in raid is often pronounced more like the vowel in ride. Each vowel is actually pronounced as a combination of two vowel sounds, called a diphthong, which many people would say was part of a drawl. The third pattern of change affects New England, the North Midland, and most of the western United States and Canada. Many speakers in these areas no longer pronounce different vowels in words like cot and caught, or tot and taught, so that the words now sound alike. When these large patterns of change combine, unevenly, with regional words and other characteristics, the result is that vernacular speech tends to be somewhat different from city to city, or in places some distance apart.

Here are some examples of American English regional speech patterns, covering pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar:

1. Pronunciation Differences (Accent and Vowel Shifts)

Southern English:

Vowel lengthening and diphthongization: “ride” may sound like [rahd]

Dropping of the final “g” in -ing: “going” → “goin’”

New England English:

Non-rhoticity: dropping the “r” after vowels, e.g., “car” → “cah”

Short “a” pronunciation in words like “bath” → [bahth]

Midwestern English:

Northern Cities Vowel Shift: “cat” pronounced more like [kyat] in areas around Chicago and Detroit

Western English:

Milder vowels, closer to General American pronunciation, with fewer marked regional features

2. Vocabulary Differences (Lexical Variation)

Soda vs. Pop vs. Coke:

Soda (Northeast), Pop (Midwest), Coke (South, sometimes generically)

Sub vs. Hoagie vs. Grinder:

The development of regional speech patterns in American English is a product of historical settlement, migration, social stratification, and cultural contact across the United States. Beginning in the 17th and 18th centuries, English settlers from different regions of Britain brought their own dialects and pronunciation patterns, which formed the foundation of early American English. Over time, geographic isolation and patterns of westward expansion led to the divergence of regional varieties, creating the basis for the distinctive Southern, New England, Midland, Northern, and Western dialects we recognize today.

African American communities contributed unique linguistic features through African language influence, creolization, and the development of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Similarly, contact with Native American languages, Dutch, German, and other immigrant languages enriched vocabulary and pronunciation

in localized regions. Urbanization, industrialization, and internal migration in the 19th and 20th centuries further reshaped regional speech, while education and mass media promoted some dialect leveling, standardization, and wider intelligibility.

Terms for a sandwich vary by region: Sub (nationally common), Hoagie (Philadelphia), Grinder (New England)

Pajamas vs. Jammies:

Informal variation by region and social group

3. Grammar Differences (Syntax and Usage)

Double modals in the South:

"I might could help you." (Southern English)

Use of "y'all" vs. "you guys":

"y'all" (Southern U.S.), "you guys" (Midwest/North)

Multiple negation (African American Vernacular English – AAVE):

"I don't know nothing about that."

4. Intonation and Stress Patterns

Southern Drawl: elongated vowels and slower speech rhythm

New York City English: rising intonation at the end of declarative sentences

Midwestern English: more neutral intonation, sometimes called "General American" These examples illustrate how American English varies across regions, not only in sound (pronunciation), but also in words (vocabulary), sentence structures (grammar), and speech patterns (intonation).

Social factors such as ethnicity, socio-economic class, and local identity continue to influence pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical usage within regions. For example, vowel pronunciation, consonant clusters, and lexical choices often reflect a speaker's regional and social background, serving as markers of identity and cultural heritage.

Overall, the evolution of regional speech patterns in American English demonstrates the dynamic interplay between historical events, geography, culture, and social interaction. It illustrates how English adapts to new environments while maintaining regional diversity and linguistic richness, making American English both highly standardized in formal contexts and remarkably varied in everyday speech. Studying these patterns provides insight into the history, identity, and social structure of the United States as expressed through language.

Questions for lecture 12

1 What is the origin of American English Modern Variation In American English

2. What are the American English Modern Variation In American English?

3. How is the vowel is pronounced as a combination of two vowel sounds?

4. Speak about American sociolinguist William Labov who suggested three sets of changes in pronunciation

5. How is the spoken standard has become associated with education?