Dialect Geography
Regional dialects of English in the USA

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The American Linguistic Atlas Project (ALAP)

- Project initiated by Hans Kurath.
- Focus on regional dialects in (eastern) USA.
- Used differing lexis and differing pronunciation to draw borders, so-called “isoglosses”.

Courtesy of the University of Michigan Photo Services.
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The three main regions
American regional dialects.
Two historical reasons

1. The various isolated colonies had their own linguistic features.
2. Colonists from different places of origin contributed words and pronunciation from their homeland.
   
   • When the colonists moved westwards, they carried their speech habits with them.
DARE Fieldwork 1960s-70s (Carver)

• Finds essentially the same dialect areas but not the same words as Kurath and McDavid

• The region-specific words evolve within the dialect and stay in place
„Speech of State”?

• State borders are political
• Instead of them DARE uses regional labels, divided by isoglosses
• For example, “South” and “South Midland”
• Over half of the words specific to these two regions overlap with each other
Urban Speech

- New York City and New York State have 122 words specific to this area
- William Labov: vitality of urban dialects, “increasing diversity” despite the standard used in the public media
- Sound change centered in the cities is found throughout the US
- Sound changes coincide with lexical changes
Map 1. The urban dialect areas of the United States based on the acoustic analysis of the vowel systems of 240 Telsar informants

The North
- North Central: Conservative long and mid vowels
- Central Northern: Monophthongization of /au/
- P2 of checked /ow/ < 1100 Hz
- The Inland North: The northern chain of /ow/ 
- 75% of /ow/ > 275 Hz
- bourbon and /au/ /ow/:
- The Boston and New England: Vocalization and low back merger
- New York City: /u/ vocalization and raising of /a/, /a/

The South
- The South: The Southern Shift
- Monophthongization of /au/
- P2 of checked /ow/ > 1500 Hz
- The Coastal Southeast: Charleston and Savannah
- frontal of /aw/ before /aw/, P2 of /aw/ > 1500 Hz

The West
- The low back merger and fronting of /aw/
- P2 of /aw/ > 1850 Hz

July 15, 1997
What makes dialects evolve and flourish despite extensive exposure to the media?

Standard English spoken in the media and in marketing, in service and in job contexts does not interfere with regional dialects because the latter evolved separately.
Conclusion

American dialects differ to British dialects in the depth of their history. The history of American English reaches back 400 years (to the early 1600s) whereas British English goes back over a thousand years.

There are no useful isoglosses in the west of the US. The settlers from the North, Midland and South mixed there with the result that the west is basically a merger of the three. Differences in vocabulary are statistical more than absolute within any given region.
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