

Chapter 4

American Dialects

A videotape that can be used with this chapter is *American Tongues*. It can be obtained for rental from American Tongues, New Day Films, 853 Broadway, 1210, New York, NY 10003. (212) 477-4604. This video provides a good idea of how people in the U.S. talk. The video can be used not only with this chapter, but also with chapter 6 on attitudes.

Opening Activity

A drawl is a term generally referring to a southern accent. Students should focus on the derogatory nature of mumble and the fact that because he speaks with a southern accent no one understands him. The second quote implies that someone who has a "North Carolina drawl" cannot be intelligent. This can lead into a general discussion of accents and perceptions, focusing on similar kinds of impressions generated by speech in their own countries and by attitudes native speakers of a language might have toward nonnative speakers.

Objectives for Students

Content

Describe the basic dialect areas of American English
Know some of the differences between American English dialect areas
Understand the influences from other languages on American English
Describe how American English dialects arose

Language

Pronunciation of sounds that differentiate speakers of American English

Skimming

Latinate vocabulary in English

Listening comprehension

Scanning

I. American English Dialects

Techniques

Activities A., B., C., and D. are all prereading activities.

Tapescript. Parentheses indicate slight variations between speakers.

Mary (and her father) lived in a (large) white house on Park Street (with her mother and father). One day they had a caller. It was a mangy little dog. Mary let him sit on the rug in front of the fireplace (in which the hickory logs were burning brightly). When she looked more closely, she saw that he was a sorry sight. He had a sore paw, many burrs in his fur, and he didn't have any collar. Mary washed the dog, but did not get him entirely clean. He looked hungry so she opened a can of food and put it in a bowl with a greasy spoon. She also gave him some water. He ate until both bowls were empty. Just then her father came in the door. She asked if they could keep the dog instead of turning him out of the house on such a cold day. They kept the merry little character for many years. Mary and the dog had lots of very good times together. (From E. Gott and R. McDavid, *Our Changing Language* [New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1965]).

Answers

C.

#2 Astronomers observed a crash of a comet into Jupiter.

D.

2. Answers will vary. A typical summary might be something like:

This article deals with the New York accent. The accent had been part of the language spoken in New York by immigrants. Because of the greater mobility of Americans, the accent is disappearing and speech in New York is becoming more homogenized.

3.
 - a.
 1. Thirty-third Street
 2. Oyster Bar
 3. Theses, thems and thoses
 4. Whatsoever
 5. Brother
 6. New York Talk
 - b.
 - er > oi
 - oi > er
 - th > d
 - er > uh (ends of words)
 - or > aw
 - c. Irish, Italian, and Eastern Europeans
 - d. Those from Latin America, Caribbean, Asia
 - e. Police officers—since the New York dialect is a source of identification
 - f. Henny Youngman and Edward Koch. They probably feel this way since the dialect is spoken by lower class individuals.
 - g. In the suburbs
 - h. Bowery Dialect, Brooklynese, and New Yorkese
 - i. Talk to a young New Yorker these days and the first thing you may notice is that he or she doesn't talk like this any more.

Additional Activities

Some words like *Mary* and *Merry*, and *collar* and *caller* are kept distinct in some dialects, but not in others. Students can be asked to listen to these words to determine whether or not they are distinct.

If possible, you could locate native speakers in your area and collect more samples using this passage.

II. American Dialects and How They Came to Be

A.

Techniques

Students can be asked to think about vocabulary differences in their own language. Are there common objects that people from one part of the country refer to in one way, while others refer to it in another way?

*Answers***B.**

Examples of Latinate words are reveal, differences, language, acceptable, imposed, educated.

C.

revealing, revelation
differ, different
linguist, lingual
accept, acceptance

Additional Activities

Following the activities in chapter 3 relating to word endings, one can use some of the words in this passage as examples—the *-able* ending (acceptable, noticeable), the *-ed* ending as an adjectival form (educated), *-tion* ending (pronunciation).

D.*Techniques*

This passage may have to be played a few times. It is useful to play the tape once and have students listen for the general idea. Groups can be formed for them to brainstorm about some of the main ideas and to predict what specific things might be important. The text of the tape is given here.

INFLUENCES ON AMERICAN ENGLISH

Actually, it's impossible to tell the story of American English without reference to British English. In the earliest settlement days, English settlers brought dialects from the various areas of Great Britain, and some of those influences may be among the earliest causes of differences in American English. Settlers in some parts of the colonies kept contact with the mother country and, as a result, their speech reflected changing speech patterns in England.

Trade and commerce kept open one avenue of contact, and many well-to-do colonists' children were educated in England. In spite of these contacts, one area of the newly founded colonies began to develop a variety of English rather different from that of Great Britain. The middle colonies, Pennsylvania in particular, began to develop a variety of English distinct from surrounding areas to the north and south. This

difference can be accounted for in several ways: their religious difference from the Puritans to the north and the Church of England people to the south; their greater percentage of nonnative speakers of English; and their rapidly developing middle class. The variety of the middle colonies was not just distinct from its American neighbors. It resembled far less its common parent, British English. Perhaps it's not too much of an exaggeration to say that here a distinct, American English was born.

From its origin, America was to become a sanctuary for all nationalities and diverse cultures. It is not surprising that other languages influenced the new variety of English developing in America.

The Dutch contributed one of America's primarily linguistic exports, the word "Yankee." The name of the traditional fool or nincompoop in Dutch folklore is Jan Kees. Apparently the Dutch settlers in New York weren't much impressed with their English neighbors in New England and soon the name Yankee was applied to all of them. As New England sailors and salesmen traveled around the world and around this country, the name went with them, losing, at least for them, its original insulting sense. During the American Civil War, residents of the southern states used it again as an insult, applying it to all northerners. In the twentieth century it still surprises many southern Americans in foreign countries to hear themselves referred to as Yankees, since for them Yankee is a term for northerners, not Americans in general.

The Dutch also contributed names we still use for sections of New York City. Few Americans today know the original meanings of these words. The Bowery, now a section of New York City, has taken its name from a Dutch word meaning farm. The Dutch word *kil*, meaning a small stream of water, or creek, still survives in New York State place names such as the Catskill Mountains and Schuykill River.

American English also borrowed from the people who were already here, the American Indians. The names of such new trees as Hickory, Catalpa, and Pecan are Indian words. And animals which were unfamiliar to the Europeans kept Indian names: chipmunk, raccoon, skunk, opossum, and woodchuck. Also borrowed were words for things of the Indians' own construction, social organizations, and beliefs. *Teepee* and *wigwam* were borrowed for kinds of Indian housing, *totem* for a religious symbol, as well as *powwow* for a meeting and *podunk* for a small village or rural area.

The French trappers, missionaries, and explorers encountered many Indian tribes earlier than the English settlers. Indian words, through French, became part of American English. *Toboggan* is a kind of sled, *bayou*, a low wetland in many parts of the American South, *caribou*, a large elk-like animal. The French contributed their own

words to American English, words such as *prairie*, a grassy flatland; *lacrosse*, a game played with a ball and sticks; *portage*, transporting a canoe and supplies overland; and *calumet*, a peace pipe.

Others contributed as well. Thousands of Africans were brought to the new world against their will to work as slaves. Modern linguists are not sure of the extensiveness of their contribution, but it is well agreed upon that such words as *cooter* for a small hard-shelled turtle, *goober* for peanuts grown in the rich soil of the American South, and such items as *banjo* for a stringed musical instrument, *boogie woogie* for music with a fast tempo, *voodoo* for mysterious rites and practices, and, of course *jazz* all are borrowed from West African languages.

American English has a number of words taken from Spanish for geographical features, such as *mesa* and *arroyo*. But, best of all, the Spanish contributed many of our widely exported cowboy words. Here are the American versions: *bronco*, *ranch*, *lasso*, *sombrero*, *chaps*, and *rodeo*, all standard words for any Hollywood western.

The list of languages that have contributed to American English is quite lengthy. It is enough to say that the language has been open to extensive borrowing, containing items from Chinese, American Indian languages, West African languages, German, Dutch, French, Yiddish, Tagalog, Polish, Italian, Hungarian, Greek, Russian, Japanese and many, many more.

In spite of this borrowing, it's important to remember that speakers of any world variety of English are in little danger of being misunderstood at basic abstract or technical levels of communication. In general, linguists are more impressed by the similarities of the varieties of English than by their differences. (From the video *Regional Dialects*, by Dennis Preston and Roger Shey)

E.

Answers

Some possibilities are:

1. a. Dutch—yankee
b. Spanish—sombrero
c. French—prairie
2. The Dutch name Jan Kees was known as a fool—so Jan Kees became yankee with the similar negative connotations.
3. Southerners always used the word yankee to refer to northerners in a disparaging way. Throughout the world, yankee refers to Americans in general, not just northerners.
4. Answers will vary, but in general should deal with the issues of migration patterns and in some instances isolation.

F.

Answers will vary.

III. Major American Dialect Areas**A.***Techniques*

Discuss scanning (searching for important details). Give students a time limit (1 to 2 minutes) within which they need to find the number of major dialect areas in the U.S.

Answers

Four major dialect areas: Northern, North Midland, South Midland, Southern.

C.

Answers will vary.

D.*Techniques*

This exercise can be used to focus on differences between spoken and written English, which are a reflection of differences between nonstandard and standard English.

Answers

This morning I *woke up* at a *quarter of nine* and saw that the shoes that I was planning to wear *needed to be fixed/needed fixing*, but I didn't have time to *wait for* the shoe repairman for (clean is a difficult word to translate; basically it marks emphasis, i.e., it was a long time that I had to wait) over half an hour while I was *standing in line*.

Additional Activities

If this course is being taught in an environment where native speakers of English are easily accessible, students can be given an assignment to find out different usages. For example, when is an object called a glass? When is it a mug? When is it a cup? This activity is most successful if students can take these objects with them. When is something a paper bag? When is it a paper sack? What is a wash rag? A wash cloth? A hero? A submarine?