

# Hillbillies, hicks, and Southern belles

# 11

## The language rebels<sup>1</sup>

The South eagerly defines itself against the North, advertising itself as more earthy, more devoted to family values, more spiritual, and then is furious to have things turned around, to hear itself called hick, phony, and superstitious. The South feeds the sense of difference and then resists the consequences.

Ayers *et al.* (1996: 63–64)<sup>2</sup>

## Defining the South

Drawing a map of any kind is not a neutral exercise. Every mapmaker brings a set of goals, presumptions and generalizations to the task. The purpose may be simply to gather data for others to use in their work, as was the case with traditional dialectology; these days it is more likely that a linguist takes an interest in mapping variation over space as one step in a larger investigation (Figure 11.1).

Regional variation shown on dialect maps is usually based one or more kinds of data: linguistic perception, linguistic production, and listener perception. Not even the most ambitious language atlases attempt to map all three of these dimensions. Any attempt to draw the geographic, cultural, political or linguistic boundaries of what we call the Southern United States would have to take in all these theoretical and practical considerations, and it would still be impossible to put a line on the map and declare it absolute (Table 11.1).<sup>3</sup>

However, there are a few features that almost all the Southern varieties of American English have in common, salient and distinct markers of the South. These are three of many features that outsiders will try to use when imitating someone from the South. That is, this is what most Northerners expect to hear when venturing South of the Mason–Dixon line:

- 1 the merger of /i/ and /e/ before nasal sounds (so that “pin” and “pen” are both “pin,” “hem” and “him” are both “him,” etc. Figure 11.2);
- 2 the monophthongization of /ai/ to /a/ as in the words tie, rice, dime which will sound something like tah, rahs, dahm.
- 3 you all or y’all for the second person plural pronoun.

The monophthongization of /ai/ to /a/ is the first stage in the Southern Shift, a series of changes in the vowel system. The shift from /ai/ to /a/ has been called the most distinctive feature of the Southern U.S. English (Baranowski 2007: 149). The distribution of this shift away from the older form /a/ to /ai/ shows distinct patterns. In Charleston, for example, Baranowski found that the wealthiest are more likely to use the newer variant /ai/, while



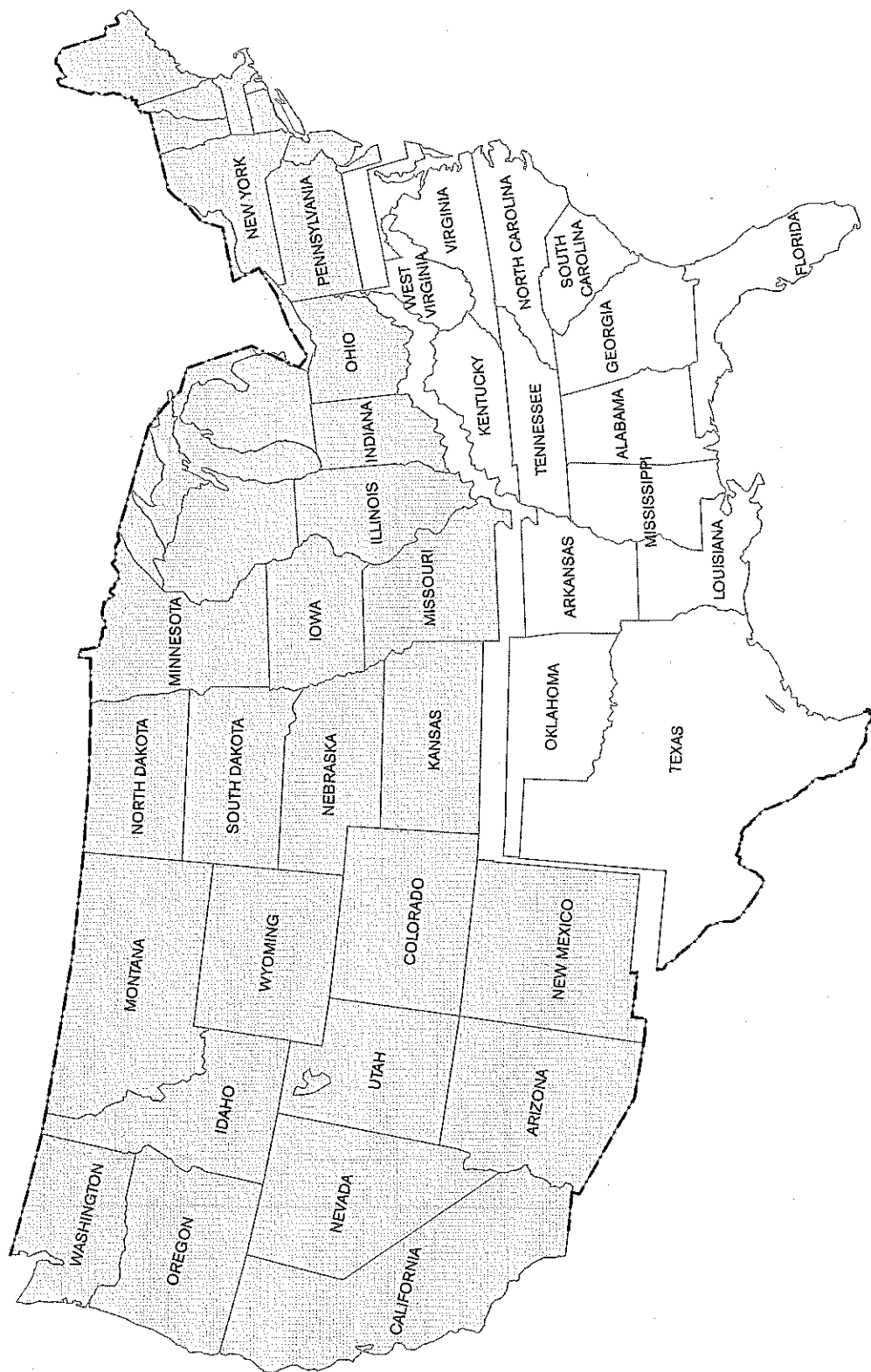


Figure 11.1 The United States Census Bureau divides the Southern region into three areas: (South Atlantic) Delaware, Maryland, DC  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Table 11.1 Estimated population in the Southern States, 2009

| <i>State</i>     | <i>Population</i> |
|------------------|-------------------|
| Alabama          | 4,625,354         |
| Arkansas         | 2,830,047         |
| Florida          | 18,182,321        |
| Georgia          | 9,509,254         |
| Kentucky         | 4,234,999         |
| Louisiana        | 4,342,582         |
| Mississippi      | 2,918,790         |
| North Carolina   | 9,036,449         |
| Oklahoma         | 3,606,200         |
| South Carolina   | 4,403,175         |
| Tennessee        | 6,144,104         |
| Texas            | 23,845,989        |
| Virginia         | 7,698,738         |
| West Virginia    | 1,810,358         |
| The South, Total | 103,188,360       |
| US total         | 307,006,550       |

Source: U.S. American Community Survey 2009

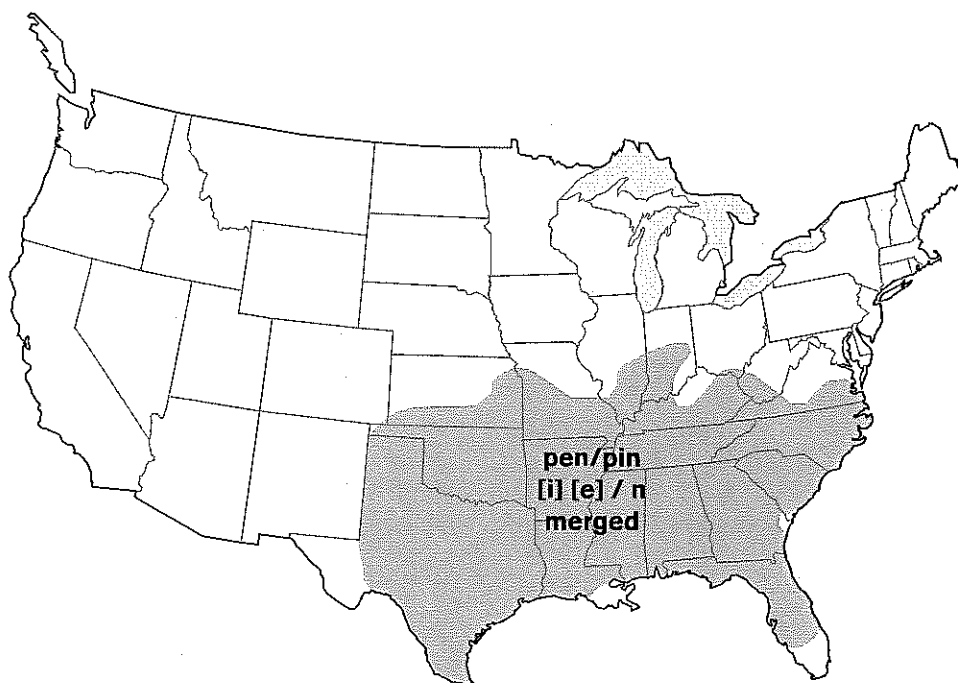


Figure 11.2 Approximate geographic area where words with an /i/ or /e/ before /n/ are realized as homonyms

the lower economic classes are more persistent in the use of the more traditional /a/ before obstruents and in a word final position (*ibid.*: 154).

The individual's understanding of boundaries is something of great interest to geographers, who have studied what has been called the maps in the mind. Ayers' body of work confirms that non-Southerners do have a consistent sense of a Southern core, which is referred to as the Deep South or Southern Trough.

## The Southern Trough

[This] cuts across Mississippi and Alabama, embracing parts of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Georgia at the edges. This trough appears to most Americans as the least desirable place in the United States to live . . . The whole South appears to be a vast saucer of unpleasant associations.

(Ayers *et al.* 1996: 69)

The concept of an undesirable South moves in concentric rings outward from the Southern Trough, as seen in a composite “mental map” constructed from a study of environmental preferences voiced by students (Gould and White 1992: 97). In Minnesota, the students found the most desirable areas of the country to be their own native Minnesota as well as California, with other favored points in the Colorado High region. In contrast, they see the Southern Trough as the least desirable place to live (Figure 11.3).

The composite map for the Alabama students looks much like a mirror image of the Minnesota map, although the Southerners, too, tend to see California as highly desirable (Figure 11.4).

What a person expects to hear is tied very closely to what he or she expects to experience. As a child I never spoke face to face with anyone with a Southern accent. Everything I knew about the South I learned by watching *Gomer Pyle*, *Green Acres* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. I have a clear memory of my fourth grade teacher telling the class we should not watch *The Beverly Hillbillies* because of the “ungrammatical and ignorant” way of speaking. And of course, everybody watched anyway. This means that for me, a Southern accent came to symbolize a very limited and peculiar set of characters, which went on until I was old enough to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and developed a real interest in a culture and place so different from urban Chicago. In time I came to understand, slowly, that the

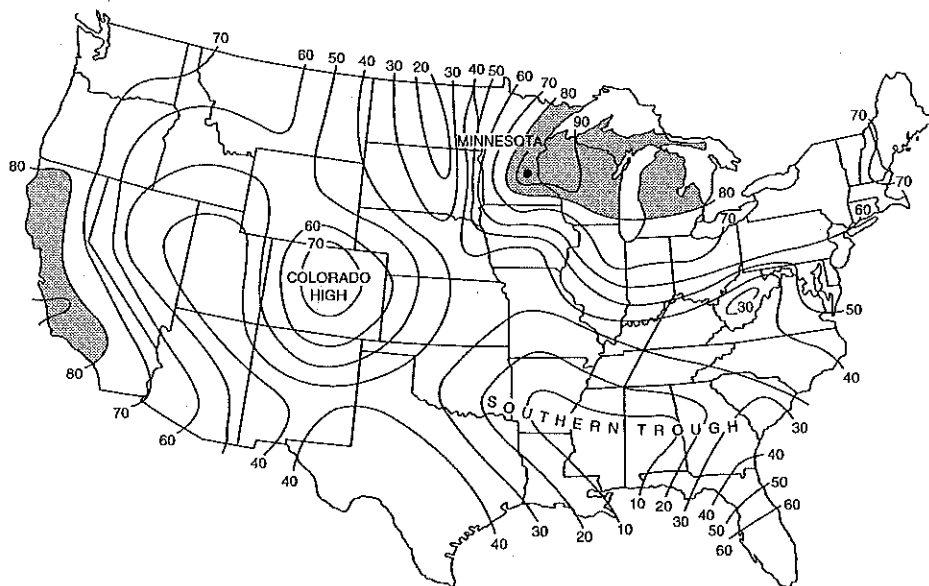


Figure 11.3 Negative evaluation of the “Southern Trough” as a place to live by University of Minnesota students

Source: Reproduced by permission of the authors from P. Gould and R. White (1974) *Mental Maps*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin, p. 98

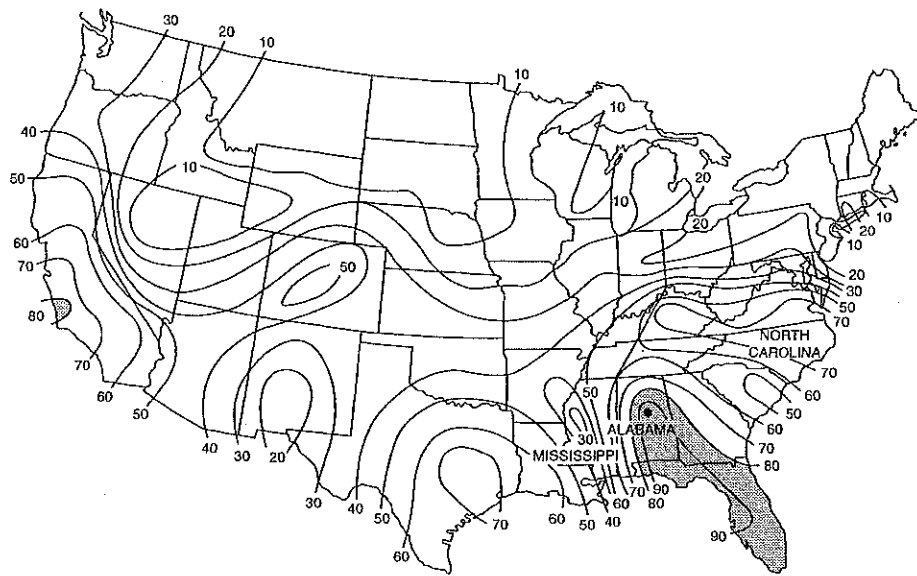


Figure 11.4 Positive evaluation of the "Southern Trough" as a place to live by University of Alabama students

Source: Reproduced by permission of the authors from P. Gould and R. White (1974) *Mental Maps*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin, p. 101

South was a big and complex place, though to this day I sometimes find myself reacting to certain Southern accents in a negative way, and once again I realize how strong a hold the standard language ideology has everyone.

Large numbers of people growing up in circumstances similar to mine have never had any reason to reexamine their preconceptions. Instead the early stereotypes have been reinforced by *The Dukes of Hazzard County*, a general public disdain for things that sound Southern, and very specific criticisms from people in positions of power, some subtle and some not so.

In addition to television comedies, Southern stereotypes originated in syndicated comic strips (*Kudzu*, *Lil' Abner*, *Gasoline Alley*) and films (*Sweet Home Alabama*, *Ma and Pa Kettle*, *Forrest Gump*, *Deliverance*). The *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* lists a range of stereotypes, including sadistic overseers, chivalrous men, good old boys, cheerleaders, beauty pageant mothers, Pentecostals, poor white trash and drunken backwoods predators (Wilson and Ferris 1989). In this artificial view of the South, English has an indiscriminate "twang" or a "drawl" and is peppered with funny and clever idioms.

This might be thought of as a North-South mental divide, a here/there that renders details of linguistic differentiation unimportant. It is certainly true that by and large, outsiders cannot distinguish an Appalachian accent from a Charleston accent, or Texas from Virginia. Of course, the reverse is also true: for the most part, Southerners are unable to tell one Northern accent from another.



### Sounds like home to me

How Southerners evaluate themselves and their speech is an important part of understanding the role of language as a marker of regional loyalties, and the resistance to leveling across space.

In a survey of 798 adult residents of Georgia, individuals answered questions about what it means to "have a Southern accent," and were subsequently asked to evaluate their own language (the results presented as "heavy" Southern or "no" accent as seen in Figure 11.5).

In any such direct inquiry, some people will underreport their own usage (claim to have no accent when in fact they do) and others will claim an accent when they are not local to an area and have not successfully acquired a new phonology. Thus this poll is not one which can tell us who actually has a Southern accent, or how "heavy" accents really are, but it can tell us that people attach bundles of social markers to degrees of Southern accent.

For that reason, such polls are useful in ways perhaps not anticipated by the persons who constructed them. In the selection of questions to be asked, the pollsters reveal much of the preconceived notions about connections between certain ways of life and language markers embodied in accent. But do these questions comprise a set of sociocultural distinctions truly relevant to the construction of definitions of "North" and "South"? Between real Southern and half-hearted or make-believe Southern?

In this questionnaire, most stereotypes about the South are represented one or more times. The pollster is looking for Southern/Non-Southern distinctions based on religious and cultural practices and beliefs, so that real Southerners – those who will admit to having "strong" accents – are the ones who eat chitlins and moon pies, drive an American car to church on Sunday mornings while other, less Southern types are at home eating bagels and lox.

Something to note: In comparing the polls in Figures 11.5 and 11.6, it becomes clear that perceptions differ very little in matters having to do with stereotype. About 50 percent of both groups find *Gone with the Wind* relevant to a definition of the South (but what if they factored race into the analysis? Would the preference hold true?). This is a clear demonstration of the strength and durability of stereotypes in defining both self and other.

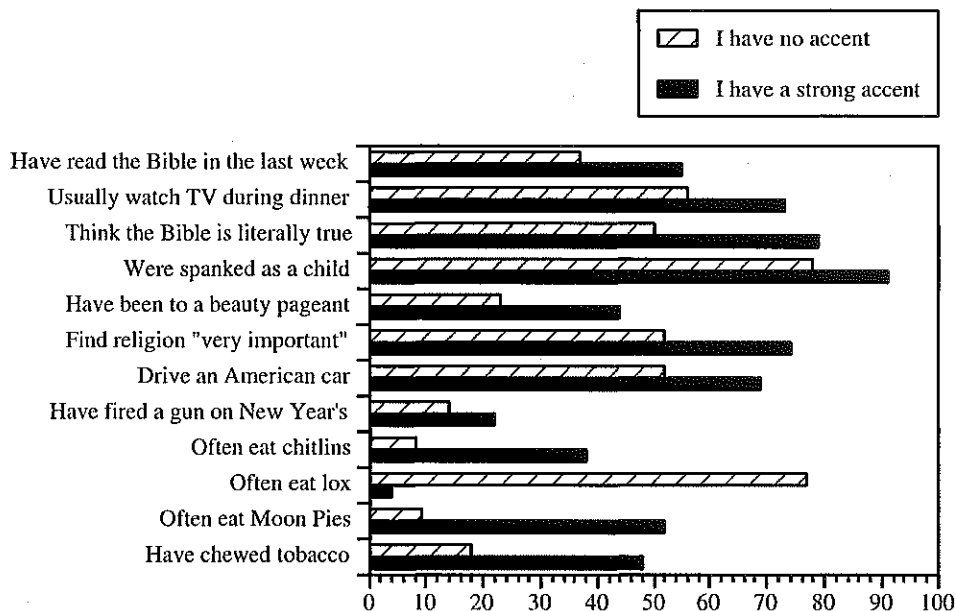


Figure 11.5 Responses of adults residing in Georgia to the yes/no question "Being Southern means that you . . ."

Source: Survey conducted April 12–24, 1995 by the Applied Research Center, Georgia State University.  
Margin of error  $\pm 3.4$  points

For the most part, variation in language is active below the level of consciousness. In the South, distinctive language features are cultivated by many. The term once used to describe such situations is covert prestige as in this example (Riddle 1993):



Joe is proud of the fact that he has a strong Piedmont accent, even knowing that it may well cost him in a job interview. If he tried to sound Yankee, his friends would laugh at him. Here the values of home and community are more important than the economic or social promises that are attached to “sounding Yankee.”

Covert and overt prestige are relative concepts and highly dependent on a speaker’s point of view. On an internet chat site, when asked what accents he likes and which ones he hates, someone like Joe says:<sup>4</sup> “There’s an accent from the part of the Piedmont of NC where I am from – slow, deliberate, thoughtful and very country. Sounds like home to me.” The fact that language variation lies at the heart of much of everyone’s construction of the South can be documented in a variety of ways.

A survey undertaken by the Center for the Study of the American South in 2001 further speaks to the fact that Southerners see language distinctions as important. Respondents were first asked to describe themselves along the familiar parameters (sex, race, age) as well as less common ones (church attendance, political leanings, regional allegiances). Those who consider themselves Southerners were far more likely to claim a strong or noticeable accent (74.8 percent acknowledged an accent of some degree; 25.2 percent denied having one at all) (Table 11.2).

It is hard to imagine constructing a similar survey for Northerners. For such a survey to be conducted in Cincinnati, for example, what would be the equivalent of *Gone with the Wind* or moon pies?

### The map in the mind

In a range of studies focusing on linguistic perceptions, Preston (1989a, 1989b, 1993a, 1993b; Preston and Long, 1999, and elsewhere) also found that in linguistic terms, non-Southerners tend to draw rough distinctions between the Southern Trough and the rest of the Southern states: Tennessee and Kentucky are the “Outer South;” Texas is its own kind of South, whereas Florida is hardly South at all in the minds of most Northerners. The “Southwest” may include Texas, but may also exclude New Mexico and Arizona, which are often grouped with those states which are perceived as prototypically West.<sup>5</sup> Figure 11.6 shows the results of a *Journal-Constitution Southern Life* poll in 1995.

Table 11.2 Do you have a Southern accent?

| Do you consider yourself a Southerner? | Do you have a Southern accent? |                         |      |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|------|
|                                        | Yes, strong                    | Noticeable              | No   |
| Yes, a Southerner                      | 29.8                           | 45.0<br>(74.8 combined) | 25.2 |
| No, not a Southerner                   | 8.1                            | 17.0<br>(25.1 combined) | 74.9 |

Source: Center for the Study of the American South, 2001, “Southern Focus Poll, Spring 2001,” Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. N = 605.

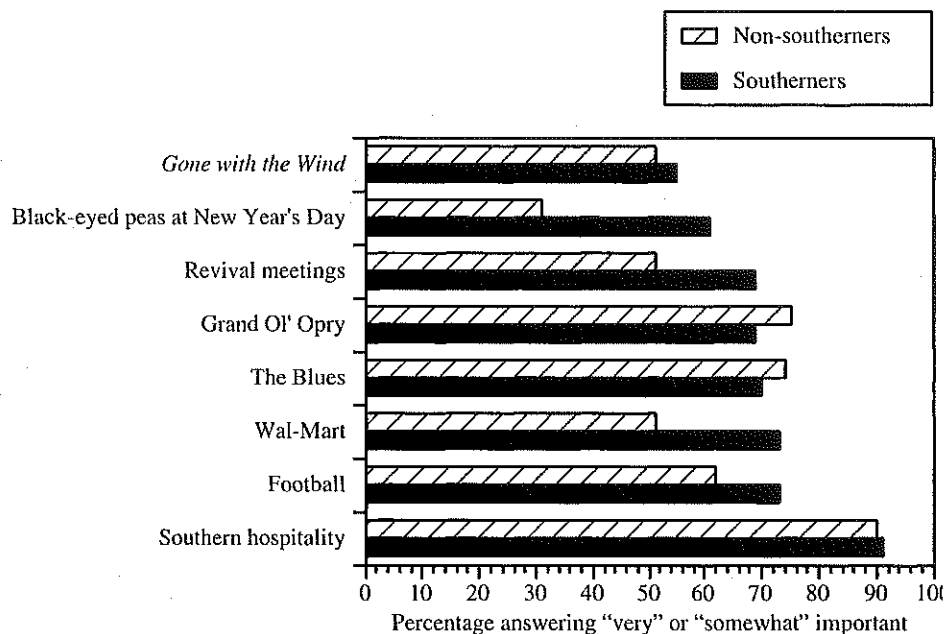


Figure 11.6 Results of a *Journal-Constitution Southern Life* poll in which 1078 Southerners and 507 non-Southerners answered the question "How important are the following to your definition of today's South?"

Source: Poll conducted in February and March 1995 by the Institute for Research in Social Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Margin of error  $\pm$  3 points for Southerners and 5 points for non-Southerners

In spite of these perceived differentiations, Northerners remain very unaware of what distinguishes one Southern variety of English from another, thus producing the one-size-fits-all accent when attempting to "sound Southern."

Students from Hawai'i have a very particular perspective on mainland regional dialects, one that casts some light on the schism between mental maps and linguistic evaluation.

Preston compares a traditional composite construction of Southern (roughly the Trough) first to the Hawai'ian perceptual boundary of the South (which adds Texas, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and the Virginias). The students were then asked to evaluate tape-recorded samples of speech from a much wider geographical range, resulting in the third boundary seen on the map (Figure 11.7). Clearly, what Hawai'ian students hear as a Southern accent moves far beyond the boundary of what they identify as the South.

Thus, if we were to isolate those states which seem consistently to be marked as some kind of Southern in cultural and linguistic terms (Table 11.2), we are then talking about almost 103 million people, or just over 34 percent of the total population of the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

This number might be too small, because it excludes those parts of Missouri, Illinois, Indiana and the Southwest where English is perceived as clearly Southern in accent. On the other hand, the figure is clearly too large; to assume that all 103 million people in the 12 named states are natives and speakers of the indigenous variety of English is a generalization that cannot bear close examination.

Beyond race, there are other dimensions which are not taken into consideration here. For example, there are many Native American language communities in the South

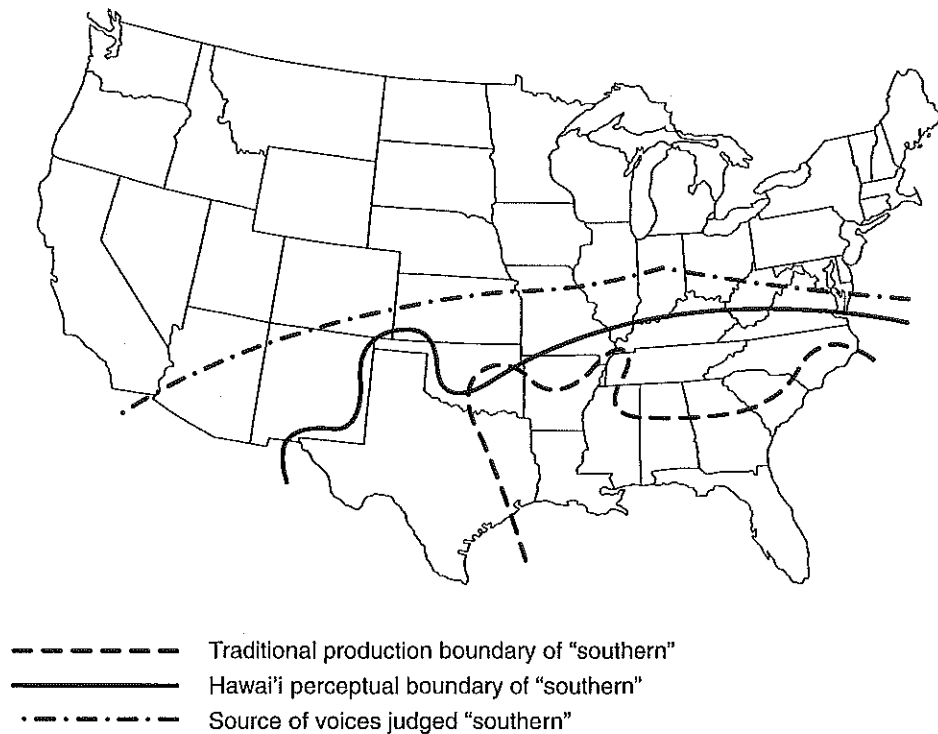


Figure 11.7 Comparison of perceptual, production, and identification boundaries for the area "Southern," from the point of view of Hawai'i respondents

Source: Preston (1989a: 129). Reprinted with permission of the publisher, De Gruyter



(Scancarelli and Hardy 2005), large enclaves of Spanish speakers (Bankston 2007), and smaller ones of Louisiana Creole and Gullah, among others. Thus it is only a very rough estimate to say that somewhere around 30 percent of the population speaks U.S. English with an accent which is heard as "Southern."

There seems to be a strong urge to synthesize the South into a single population united primarily in the fact that it is distinct from the North. This is a process Southerners themselves both promote and reject, according to Ayers *et al.*:

The South plays a key role in the nation's self-image: the role of evil tendencies overcome, mistakes atoned for, progress yet to be made. Before it can play that role effectively, the South has to be set apart as a distinct place that has certain fundamental characteristics. As a result, Southern difference is continually being recreated and reinforced . . . The South eagerly defines itself against the North, advertising itself as more earthy, more devoted to family values, more spiritual, and then is furious to have things turned around, to hear itself called hick, phony, and superstitious. The South feeds the sense of difference and then resists the consequences.

(Ayers *et al.* 1996: 63–64)

### Hostility with a smile

Nora Norules, a young attorney, worked for a law firm in a large city. With hair like spun gold and eyes like wild violets, she favored traditional business suits.

One day Ms. Merry Erudite, a client, said to Bob, a senior law partner, "When your new attorney speaks, her looks fall off her. In fact, your firm begins to look shabby after she utters a few sentences. Bob, she wouldn't know an irregular verb if it bit her on the elbow. She says, for example, 'I have went,' and she doesn't know she's made a glaring mistake."

"I know, but what can we do? She is, after all, a brilliant attorney," said Bob.

Merry said, "She also says 'have ran' and 'has broke.' I suggest that each time one of your employees says, 'I have went,' you pull out a stun gun, and let 'em have it. Then stress proper usage by repeating, 'I have gone. I had gone. He has gone. They have gone.' Maybe they'll get the idea and remember to replace went with gone when using helping verbs."

Dolly Withrow, *Charleston Daily Mail*, July 27, 2009.<sup>6</sup>

Reproduced with permission.

I start with an excerpt from Withrow's newspaper column to establish one clear fact: there are Southerners who participate – gleefully – in the language-focused subordination not just of strangers, but of their neighbors and co-workers. Note that the characters in Withrow's fictional scenario are not poor or uneducated; the person who is getting the brunt of the criticism is beautiful and accomplished.

Perhaps this column was meant to be humorous, but in fact the author has provided an excellent example of Bourdieu's strategies of condescension (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991: 68–71). Strategies of condescension is a reference to a tactic whereby an empowered individual (someone with social legitimacy in terms of employment or education or language or other kinds of authority) – appropriates the subordinated language for a short period of time in order to exploit it. In this case, the author repeats the verb constructions which offend her in order to mock them, and the person who uses them.

Withrow is a former college professor of English, someone who writes for newspapers and has written a book about grammar and usage. Those accomplishments are enough for her to claim the advantage over someone she describes as a brilliant lawyer. Withrow claims authority in matters of language with some particularly harsh and hostile imagery which reduces speakers of the unnamed dialect to creatures in need of violence to be kept in line. The strategy of condescension is in fact a part of a larger strategy of subversion, or within the framework set up for this study, part of the overall language subordination model.

There are many Southerners who are known to a wider audience: politicians Bill Clinton and Al Gore; writers Elmore Leonard, Roy Blount and Dorothy Allison; journalists Katie Couric and Kokie Roberts; actors Matthew McConaughey and Channing Tatum. And still, the Southerners who seem to come most quickly to the minds of Northerners are the fictional ones, and more than that, the stereotypical fictional ones: Gomer, Pa and Ellie Mae and the rest of the Beverly Hillbillies, murderous backwoodsmen, vapid beauty queens, spoiled young women and wise old ones.

One of the primary characteristics of the stereotyped Southerner is ignorance, but it is a specific kind of ignorance – one disassociated from education and literacy:

- A. [William Natcher, a member of the House of Representatives from Kentucky]  
"mumbled in a Mississippi drawl nobody understands."

(NPR, March 23, 1994, Reporter: Kokie Roberts)





- B. *Anchor*: Don't ask me why, but you know and I know the rest of the country tends to snicker when they hear a strong Southern accent, which can make the speaker feel a little self-conscious. So what do you do about it? Well you can ignore it or get annoyed, or like some Greenville, South Carolina students, if you can't beat 'em, you can join 'em.

(*ABC Evening News*, December 15, 1991)



- C. I got an interview with an extremely elite undergraduate college in the Northeast. They conducted the first substantial part of the interview in [another language] and it went well. When they switched to a question in English, my first answer completely interrupted the interview . . . they broke out laughing for quite a while. I asked what was wrong and they said they "never would have expected" me to have such an accent. They made a big deal about me having a [prestigious accent in the second language] and such a strong Southern accent. Of course, I had been aiming for bland Standard American English. After that, I got a number of questions about whether I'd "be comfortable" at their institution. Subtle, but to me it was not ambiguous.

(University foreign language professor, native of the South)

- D. For 37 years, Charles Kuralt has shown us what network news can be – calm, thoughtful, perceptive. Beneath that deceptive North Carolina drawl, there's a crisp intelligence.

(*Lansing State Journal*, "Daily Guide", April 3, 1994, p. 1)

Together, these comments on the relationship between language, intelligence and communication demonstrate the ways in which language barriers are built and rationalized. In Example (A), the reporter (notably herself from New Orleans, and the child of life-long politicians) projects to her listeners an unwillingness to understand the Southern accent in question. Although she is clearly in a position to ascertain Representative Natcher's place of origin, she is content to misrepresent this, lumping all Southerners together into a group of drawling and incomprehensible non-conformers who deserve to be pointed out and mocked.

While (A) demonstrates an irritability and condescension which is at odds with journalistic objectivity, (B) resorts to trivialization and mockery. In a nation-wide broadcast, the newscaster uses the first person plural, we. This is a coercive gesture, one that forces an alliance.

Example (C) – this one anecdotal – demonstrates Northern discomfort when a link is drawn between intellectual authority and the South. A new PhD, a native speaker of English, interviews for a faculty position in a foreign language department. He speaks that language fluently, and with a prestigious accent. His experience, demeanor and education have earned him an interview at an Ivy League school, which goes well. Until the interview switches to English. Whatever advantages he brought into the room are forgotten and he is summarily rejected. He remains the same person, expressing the same range and quality of ideas, but his currency is devalued by language features which link him to the South.

In (A) the reporter was irritable about the accent which she found out-of-place and inappropriate (and hence worthy of rejection); the search committee members in (B) have nothing to do with their discomfort but to externalize it as humor. This group behavior they find socially acceptable, regardless of the way it affected the job candidate.

In (D), the author does not deny that a Southerner has used language in a clear and perceptive way. Instead, she specifically draws attention to the fact that Kuralt's language is not what she expected it to be. Humor, which can be loosely defined in just this way – how people react when reality and expectations clash – often focuses on a juxtaposition:

Gov. Clinton, you attended Oxford University in England and Yale Law School in the Ivy League, two of the finest institutions of learning in the world. So how come you still talk like a hillbilly?

(Mike Royko, "Opinion", *Chicago Tribune*, October 11, 1992)

Federal law requires commercial airliners to carry infants trained to squall at altitudes above two hundred feet. This keeps the passengers calm, because they're all thinking, "I wish somebody would stuff a towel into that infant's mouth," which prevents them from thinking, "I am thirty-five thousand feet up in the air riding in an extremely sophisticated and complex piece of machinery controlled by a person with a Southern accent."

(The Dave Barry 1995 Calendar, Tuesday, April 4 1995)

In contrast to the Northern construction of intelligence which is closely linked to a high level of education, there is a construction of Southern intelligence that has more to do with common sense and life experience. Typified by the character of Sheriff Andy Taylor in the popular television series *Mayberry RFD* and *The Andy Griffith Show*, this is the Southerner whose intelligence is native rather than acquired. Many plots and comic situations in *Mayberry* depended on the construction of Southern mother-wit and its contrast to the less instinctual, acquired Northern intelligence.

As was the case with Disney animated stories, in this situation comedy Southern accents are restricted to those who fit the stereotype: while Andy has a North Carolina accent, his son, aunt, and cousins do not. Nor do the philosophizing barber or the mild-mannered town accountant, or the teacher (a serious love interest of the main character, and – in line with the patterns noted earlier in the Disney films – a speaker of \*SAE) or the pharmacist. The only Southern accents in this rural Southern town are the deceptively clever Andy, the dimwitted but good-hearted car mechanics (Gomer and Goober), and the occasional rural characters who come into town to make music or straighten out legal problems resulting from clan feuds, illegal stills, or excessive violence (Ernest T. Bass). There are no regularly appearing African American characters in this particular corner of the South.

It is primarily on the basis of intellect linked to education that Northerners try hardest to convince Southerners that their language is deficient. People with unacceptable accents are encouraged to get rid of them by enrolling in a class. The people who show their allegiance to home and region by means of language are expected to understand that they are subordinate, intellectually and culturally, to their neighbors. The fact that the stereotypes which underlie this reasoning are imaginary formations is irrelevant; their power is still real, and they are effective.

As Withrow's column excerpt at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates, the subordination process is most successful when the targets of these efforts become actively complicit.

What is so particularly interesting about subordination tactics in this case is that the object of subordination is a whole nation of people, united in terms of history and culture rather than in terms of race or ethnicity. It is fairly easy to conceive of the strategies and



processes by which African Americans – 12 percent of the population living in communities across the country – are rendered susceptible to language subordination, and come to embrace and propagate a language ideology which works to their own disadvantage. But the process is a bigger challenge when the targeted group is as large and as internally diverse as the Southern U.S.

Many persons born and raised in the South have no desire to live anywhere else, and thus it would seem that threats of exclusion and gatekeeping would be less effective. To someone living in the heart of Georgia or North Carolina or Tennessee, the idea that they need to acquire an “accentless” variety of Midwestern English to succeed might seem ludicrous. Nevertheless, personal anecdotes indicate that Northern bias and standard language ideology have an increasingly long reach:

“It’s ironic,” says [Judith] Ivey [actor], who is from the Lone Star State, “that probably the one project that will give me the most exposure [a movie set in the South] . . . is one that requires my Texas accent. Particularly since I was told that if I didn’t get rid of it, I would have a very limited career.”

(Liebman 1993:14)

School official . . . said the [accent reduction] course began when she heard people complain that their accents interfered with business. “Instead of listening to what you’re saying, they’re passing the phone around the office saying, ‘Listen to this little honey from South Carolina.’ It’s self-defeating. It’s annoying. It’s humiliating.”

(Riddle 1993: A5)

Soon after Atlanta was awarded the 1996 Olympics a year ago, a column appeared in the *Atlanta Business Chronicle* exhorting people to “get the South out of our mouth” to impress all the expected visitors. The author . . . a communications consultant from New Jersey, wrote: “By cleaning up our speech, maybe we can finally convince the world that we’re not just a bunch of cow-tipping morons down here.”

(Pearl 1991)

[A] human resources worker at Southern Bell, [X] is trying her best not to sound like a Southern belle . . . she is up for a promotion, and she is worried the decision will be made by Northerners . . . She is also taking night speech classes at a community college. Unless she can drop the accent, she fears, the promotion committee “might not think I’m so sharp.”

(ibid.)

In all of these cases, Southerners exhibit insecurity about their language and a willingness to accept responsibility for poor communication. In the third case above, the person voicing the criticism and calling for acceptance of responsibility and change toward Northern norms is, in fact, from New Jersey. But she still claims the right to speak for all the people in that region where she lives and works: she wants the world to see her as something other than a “cow-tipping moron” in spite of the fact that she lives in the South.

It is unclear whether she rejects the “cow-tipping moron” stereotype as unfair and untrue, or subscribes to it and wishes not to be included in that group. In either case, she believes that the way to accomplish such a goal is to convince the rest of the South to talk as she does. But here she takes on a Herculean task, for the South provides, more than any single ethnic, racial, or national origin group, strong resistance to language subordination.

The news media has been shown to be particularly enamored of stories having to do with accent reduction, and those reports always include a discussion of such efforts in the South. "Hush Mah Mouth! Some in the South Try to Lose the Drawl" (Pearl 1991) is not an unusual headline or introductory comment in these kinds of reports. They often contain some small commentary from dissenting Southerners: "Somebody was going to judge me on the way I spoke, then I would judge him as being close-minded" (*ABC Evening News*, December 15, 1991).

The news media does not often report on Southern resistance to language subordination. When doing so, however, journalists still manage to put a decidedly ideological spin on the rejection of subordination. In a newspaper report on the death of an accent reduction course in South Carolina due to lack of interest, the reporter summarizes various reasons why interest might have died out: "With tongue firmly in cheek, [the instructor] offered three possible reasons: Everybody's cured. Everybody thinks the rest of the world talks funny. Or, in a country that now has a Southern President and vice president, maybe nobody much cares anymore" (Riddle 1993: A5).

The tone here is humorous. Clearly it is difficult for those who consider themselves \*SAE speakers to take seriously the idea that the South could be content with itself in terms of language. It is equally difficult to imagine, in spite of professed wishes to this effect, that Southerners would somehow magically lose their accents, and could be "cured" of this language which is so uniquely their own.

Another reporter writes of a "Pro-Drawl Movement" in which the resistance is trivialized, and once again the strategy of condescension extends to the representation of Southern U.S. English in quasi-phonetic terms:

Ludlow Porch's radio talk show is at the center of Atlanta's Southern resistance. Mr. Porch, whose voice is as slow and sweet as molasses in January, gets a steady stream of female callers who call him "sweet thang" and male callers who call him "mah friend." When complimented, Mr. Porch is apt to say, "Well, ah'm tickled" or "Bless your heart."

But even Mr. Porch concedes that things are changing. He lives in a suburb where he goes for weeks without hearing a Southern accent. And he admits that, sometimes, he even catches himself "doin' silly things – like pronouncin' mah 'g's."

(Pearl 1991)

Filtered through the reporter's standard language ideology condescension, resistance is stripped of much of its power. Here Mr. Porch's concern about the fate of his culture and language are made into humorous objects. He is then made to testify against himself, in that he admits that language changes, even as he watches. The journalist's only conclusion can be that language is changing away from Southern norms, and toward Northern ones. Thus once again, resistance is demonstrated to be useless.

When Southern voices are heard uncensored, it almost always appears within Southern boundaries, as in this column from the *Dallas Morning News*:

The [Southern League] encourages Southerners in the exercise of their indefeasible right to be Southern, never mind Northern reproaches and sneers . . . The language of the older South is the language of the small towns in which most Southerners grew up. Gone with the wind! The culture of the towns, and sometimes the towns themselves, have disappeared . . . The old way of speaking has charm and value.

Language is a part of being . . . The more such threads we break heedlessly, the more isolated we become in a society seemingly bent on annihilating memory itself. We're not supposed to love the past, we're supposed to hate it. Modernity drums this message into us relentlessly.

(Murchison 1996)

There is no doubt that in the delineation of the nation, we use accent as a cultural shorthand to talk about bundles of properties which we would rather not mention directly. When a Northerner appropriates a pan-Southern accent to make a joke or a point, he or she is drawing on a strategy of condescension and trivialization that cues into those stereotypes so carefully structured and nurtured: Southerners who do not assimilate to Northern norms are backward but friendly, racist but polite, obsessed with the past and unenamored of the finer points of higher education. If they are women, they are sweet, pretty and not very bright.

Focusing on language difference allows us to package the South this way, and to escape criticism for what would otherwise be seen as narrow-mindedness. Accent makes it possible to draw the nation's attention to the South's need for redemption without specifically raising those topics which make us nervous. If white Southerners are not distinguishable by other ethnic markers, by characteristic physical features, or religion, language is one simple and effective way of distinguishing between self and other. Because in this case differences are historical and cultural, there is less footing for an ideology which subordinates and trivializes the language and the cultures attached to it.

Nevertheless, the process continues. Accent reduction courses taught by Northerners spring up, find some uneasy response in communities with strong Northern ties, and then die away. Movies are made in which the lazy and narrow-minded twang and drawl. Southern students who come North are taken aside and told that their native language phonology will be an impediment to true success. Job applicants are laughed at, and on the floor of Congress, reporters smirk and report not on the Representative's position, but on his or her language.

The South has resources to call on, ways to deflect subordination tactics and it seems that at the writing of this book, many Southerners are willing to take a stand:

Notwithstanding the debate over [the South's] regional boundaries and the definition of its cultural ethos, it is safe to conclude that no region in the United States has a stronger sense of its identity. The increasing commodification of things Southern – from kudzu to speech – is ample testament of this persistent and intensifying awareness.

(Wolfram 2003: 124)

Thus the institutions which are most responsible for the subordination process coax and wheedle toward the ultimate goal of cultural and linguistic assimilation, and are met with suspicion and defiance.

### **The seduction of accent reduction**

The news media has topics which seem to be of steady and ongoing interest to them, and these are brought to the public's attention on a regular basis. One such topic is the area of accent reduction, or a concentrated effort to take a person who speaks English with a

stigmatized regional, social, or foreign accent, and (supposedly) replace it with one which is favored.

Accent reduction is marketed and sold by individuals who own their own businesses, or more rarely, in courses organized by local schools and colleges. College courses to reduce accent are found primarily in areas with high levels of immigration. There are also a multitude of private coaches who will take on students, but speech or accent reduction provided privately is expensive.

*The New York Times* ran a news article that reads like an advertisement about an accent reduction institute, in which prices were stated plainly: group training, \$40 per hour per individual; \$100 an hour for individual training (not including materials); or the owner will instruct privately "at a fee of \$150 an hour, or \$210 for an hour and a half session, plus material and travel time, though most clients visit him" (Luongo 2007).

There are legitimate reasons to offer this kind of instruction. People who have acquired English as a second language and who would simply like to come closer to a native pronunciation of U.S. English may want and pursue such training. Actors often need to learn how to simulate another accent, in a contrived setting and for short periods of time. These are not unreasonable goals, and they are often pursued by well-meaning individuals.<sup>7</sup>

It is the position of ASHA [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association] that no dialectal variety of English is a disorder or a pathological form of speech or language. Each social dialect is adequate as a functional and effective variety of English. Each serves a communication function as well as a social solidarity function. It maintains the communication network and the social construct of the community of speakers who use it. Furthermore, each is a symbolic representation of the historical, social and cultural background of the speakers. ASHA also recognizes that standard English has been adopted by society as the linguistic archetype used by the government, the mass media, business, education, science, and the arts.

(Prepared statement of Charlena M. Seymour, President, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association before the Congressional Hearings on Ebonics, January 23, 1997)<sup>8</sup>

And yet a large proportion of those advertising accent reduction or elimination draw in students with false promises and under false pretenses.

In any city of average size, there will be a few people who have hung out a shingle and sought clients with the claim that they can teach them to lose one accent and acquire another. There is no regulation or licensing for such businesses, in the same way that an individual can claim to have developed a miracle diet and charge money for it.<sup>9</sup>

The providers of these services are often quite willing to take a public stance on issues of multilingualism and accent:

It is absolutely wrong to discriminate on the basis of accent. However, I think this country would be much better off if everybody spoke the same language and if communication was as clear as possible . . . If we were all clearly communicating – this doesn't mean behaving the same – we'd be much better off as a society. I'm not denying heritage, but I think that speech impediments make a person feel bad about him or herself. Speech differences [can foster] misinterpretations. Accents divide people.

(*New York Newsday*, June 29, 1993)

When asked by the reporter "Is this another step in the homogenization of America?" an accent reduction teacher in New York answers: "I'm not on a search and destroy mission to eradicate accents. You know most of the country speaks General American, and we want to fit in" (*CBS Evening News*, October 10, 1984).

Having asked the difficult question which addresses individual freedoms and the relationship of language and accent to identity, the reporter has also solicited the standard response, which is quite simply, that homogenization is a good thing. The issue of whether or not the goal is realistic or attainable has never been raised, but the ideal – linguistic assimilation to \*SAE norms – is seen as an appropriate price to pay in order to succeed.

The media like accent reduction, and they do not seem to distinguish between reasonable claims about language and more outrageous ones. In fact, they seem to be so clearly enamored of the idea of accent reduction and assimilation to a homogenous \*SAE, that they are willing to write and broadcast stories about these efforts on a regular basis.

Disinformation is easily documented across media outlets, and it is the nature of the disinformation which is revealing. The story we hear again and again from news media representatives is that their own language is the national aesthetic and that those in the broadcast media speak a homogeneous English which does not betray (and one notes the value-laden nature of that particular lexical choice) their regional origin. In fact, broadcast news journalists do speak U.S. English with the same range of social, regional and stylistic variation that every other speaker uses. What this means, then, is that not all variation is unacceptable or forbidden or stigmatized: it is only those variants associated with groups out of favor which must be addressed. Asian, Indian and Middle Eastern accents and Spanish accents are not acceptable; apparently French, German, British, Swedish, accents are, regardless of the communication difficulties those languages may cause in the learning and communication of English.

In New York, the accent reduction teacher tells the reporter that they want "to fit in"; but the fact is, those speakers do fit into their settings, in linguistic terms. What she seems to be saying is that a language which signals a New York or Puerto Rican origin is a liability, whereas one which indicates the Midwest is not. The subtle argument is not for overall linguistic assimilation to a perfectly static U.S. English, but to a language which is generally Midwest, middle-class, and colorless.

The individuals who provide us with information and news on a daily basis in print and broadcast forums have an unusual amount of power and control in the lives of the public. They are given free admittance to our homes, to bring to us their factual knowledge about the workings of the world. This process involves choosing among those pieces of information to share, and presenting them in a form which is accessible and understandable. The translation process from raw material to finished news report involves filters of all kinds, many of which we are not immediately aware of when we take in the information over our dinners. The politics and cultural preconceptions which shape the news and the presentation of the news include ideas about language, and the importance of language. The process of language standardization is one which is implicitly and explicitly supported by the information industry, for practical reasons. In practical terms, it is useful for them to have authority in issues of language, which is their primary tool. The assumption of this authority happened long ago, but it is necessary in this social contract as in others to remind all parties of the terms. Consider the ABC piece on accent reduction designed for those who have a Southern accent.



**ABC Evening News, December 15, 1991**

*Anchor:* Don't ask me why, but you know and I know the rest of the country tends to snicker when they hear a strong Southern accent, which can make the speaker feel a little self-conscious. So what do you do about it? Well you can ignore it or get annoyed, or like some Greenville, South Carolina students, if you can't beat 'em, you can join 'em. Here's Al Dale.

[film clip: *My Fair Lady*, "The Rain in Spain Stays Mainly in the Plain"]

*Al Dale:* Henry Higgins had Eliza Doolittle and Dave F. has Mary M.

*Student:* "There is a tall willow outside my window" [pause, due to dissatisfaction with her pronunciation. Repeats:] "Maaa."

*Teacher:* OK, try it again.

*Al Dale:* At South Carolina's Greenville Tech, F. teaches a popular course called "How to Control your Southern Accent". Not how to lose it, just how to bring it under control.

*Teacher:* A communication problem is when someone starts paying more attention to how you're saying something than what you're saying.

[film clip *Cool Hand Luke*, "What we've got here is failure to communicate."]

*Al Dale:* In movies and on television, Southern accents are often used to indicate villainy or dim wittedness.

[television clip, *Andy Griffith Show*. Man fooled into believing that dog can talk.]

*Al Dale:* That attitude irritates Bill J. who signed up for the course because he does business on the phone with Northerners.

*Student:* They will make fun of you, and "listen to this guy," you know, "put him on the loudspeaker."

*Al Dale:* In the offices?

*Student:* Yeah, you know they want everybody to hear.

*Student:* The more you get into it, to me, the more I realize you know not how bad I sound but how much better I could sound.

*Al Dale:* Other students on campus say sounding Southern is just fine.

*Student:* Don't see any reason changing it now.

*Student:* Somebody was going to judge me on the way I spoke then I would judge him as being close-minded.

*Al Dale:* Students in the class say they're not trying to deny their heritage.

*Student:* I don't feel comfortable with the way I speak. I feel like I should do better.

[Film clip: *My Fair Lady*, "The Rain in Spain"]

*Al Dale:* Just as it did for Eliza Doolittle, what worked for these students is practice . . .

*Students:* "Pepper . . . hanger," "sister, remember," "I can't follow the minnow in the shallow water."

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

- In this chapter, the popular entertainment examples that contribute to Southern stereotypes are dated. You may not know who Lil' Abner is, and you may never have seen an episode of *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Does this indicate to you a decline in Southern stereotypes? If not, where are the current-day stereotypes to be found? How were your beliefs and opinions about the South (or the North) formed? If you are interested in pursuing this question, you may want to start with Cooke-Jackson and Hansen (2008) "Appalachian Culture and Reality TV: The Ethical Dilemma of Stereotyping Others."
- Read the following article: Knight, D. (2000) Standards. In R. Dal Vera (ed.) *Standard Speech and Other Contemporary Issues in Professional Voice and Speech Training*. New York: Applause, pp. 61–78.  
Summarize Knight's main points and his arguments. Which ones do you find credible, and why?
- If you are a Southerner, how many different Southern accents do you recognize? Do you consider yourself good at telling accents apart? What features do you take note of when people talk? Which accents do you dislike, and can you figure out why, objectively?
- If you know a child of 10 years or so and have that child's parent's permission, see if you can elicit opinions about the South (or North, depending on where you live) without leading. If this isn't possible, try someone of your grandparent's generation. Compare your findings in class.
- Without thinking or preparation, write down as many non-fictional Southerners you can think of. These can be personal acquaintances or public figures. When you're finished, go back and try to be specific about what part of the South each person comes from. Check your answers for accuracy. What results do you draw from this exercise? (If you are a Southerner, reverse this process and make a list of Northerners or Westerners.) If you are a Southerner, how much do you know about, for example, North Dakota as compared to Michigan, or Kansas compared to Idaho? Do you notice any linguistic differentiation? Is there differentiation that you just don't hear?
- Read the entire column by Withrow quoted at the beginning of the section called "Hostility with a Southern Accent." Consider that you have been engaged by the same newspaper to write a column that represents a different point of view. In what ways might it be possible to approach Withrow to have a calm and rational discussion about the subject of grammar? She clearly feels very strongly about this subject, and she will need to be approached carefully, with solid arguments.
- A woman writes to Dear Abby to say that she has moved to the Boston area after living her whole life in Jackson, Mississippi. It has been two years, but she is still not used to people laughing in her face and mocking her accent. She doesn't understand why people find this not only acceptable, but amusing. She wants to know how best to respond when she comes across this behavior. How do you think Miss Abby will respond, and why?
- In an article called "The Nationalization of a Southernism," Tillery *et al.* (2000) present evidence that one feature of Southern U.S. English is actually spreading into the North, at a good pace. What feature do you think this might be? Read the article and discuss how and why this might be happening. If you would like to look at this issue more closely, read Hyman (2006).

## Notes

- 1 In this chapter I am leaving aside African American Vernacular English as it is spoken in the South. The similarities and differences between Southern AAVE and Southern White Vernacular English (SWVE) are a matter of disagreement among linguists, one that cannot be addressed here in sufficient detail. See especially Cukor-Avila (2003) for a concise overview of what is called the divergence–convergence debate.
- 2 Ayers is a life-long resident of the South and an expert on Southern history. Those interested in language variation over space and most especially the concept of the South will find *All over the Map: Rethinking America's Regions*, a book Ayers co-wrote and co-edited, to be of great use and interest.
- 3 Kretzschmar provides a concise but thorough discussion of the technological and theoretical challenges of mapping Southern English (Kretzschmar 2003, 2004, 2008a, 2008b).
- 4 November 2008. URL on file.
- 5 Similar studies have been conducted in Germany (Dailey-O'Cain 2000); and for Garo, a language spoken in rural India and Bangladesh. The willingness of individuals to make such judgments is well documented.
- 6 An abbreviated biographical sketch of the author from the *Hamilton Stone Review*, Fall 2008:

Dolly Withrow, a retired English professor, taught at West Virginia State University for 16 years . . . She is the author of four books, including *The Confident Writer*, a grammar-based writing textbook for college students and writers in general. A columnist for *The Charleston Daily Mail* and *The Jackson Herald*, Dolly has won national writing awards . . . West Virginia Public Radio broadcast her essays for three years. She is a public speaker and grammar workshop presenter.

- 7 The business of accent reduction is to be kept clearly distinct from speech pathology, in which professionals are trained to work with those who have difficulty speaking for reasons beyond their control. The majority of speech pathologists work, for example, with children with cleft palates, stuttering, central auditory processing deficit, dysphagia, speech aphasia after a stroke, and other serious conditions.
- 8 The transcript of the entire hearing is available online at: <http://goo.gl/ZAJkX>.
- 9 In a review of the first edition of this book, Knight (2000) alternately bashed and then reluctantly acknowledged points made in this text and in the writings of other linguists about those who sell their services as accent specialists. Specifically he admitted that there is no regulation or licensing for such businesses, but pointed out that neither were there such requirements for linguists.

In fact, every academic linguist attends graduate school, passes masters and/or doctoral exams, and defends a theses or dissertation. Any linguist on a college faculty has had to apply and compete for that position. In short, academic linguists do not just hang up a shingle.

**Suggested further reading**

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- Griffin, L. J. and Thompson, A.B. (2003) Enough About the Disappearing South: What About the Disappearing Southerner? *Southern Cultures* 9: 51–65.
- Hyman, E. (2006) The All of You-All. *American Speech* 81.
- The Language Samples Project (n.d.) Varieties of English. Available at: <http://www.ic.arizona.edu/~lsp/>.
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