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University of Leeds
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CONTRIBUTIONS OF BRITISH FOLK SPEECH TO AMERICAN PRONUNCIATION

By HANS KURATH

I

The regional varieties of English spoken by educated Americans have so much in common with Standard British English (SBE) that communication between such speakers of English living on either side of the Atlantic offers little difficulty. American English shares with British English not only the greater part of the vocabulary, but also the system of functional sounds (phonemes) and the structural aspects of morphology and syntax. This can only mean that Standard British English and literary English have been the dominant force in shaping American usage from early colonial days until the Revolution, and that British influence continued well into the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, the regional differences that we find along the Atlantic nowadays point to the survival of features derived from British dialects or—which comes to the same thing—from regional variants of SBE current, say, in the West or the North of England during the seventeenth century, when the several colonies were established.

That features not traceable to SBE should survive on the North American continent is not surprising.

Coming from all parts of the British Isles, though not in equal numbers, the great majority of the settlers, unschooled and unlettered, spoke the dialects of their home counties. In their old surroundings they had heard a regional variety of the national standard. They understood it, but did not speak it. There was no need of it in dealing with their neighbours, and they had little occasion to transact business with outsiders. In fact, mimicking the speech of their “betters” would have clashed with their social status in the sharply divided and class-conscious society of the seventeenth century.

In their new homes—on Massachusetts Bay, on the Delaware, on Chesapeake Bay, or on the coast of the Carolinas—this unlettered majority was confronted with an utterly different situation. Coming from different sections of the Old Country, one’s neighbours spoke a variety of dialects that could hardly serve the purpose of effective communication within the community. Under the circumstances, an adaptation of the standard language of England inevitably became the

medium of communication in each of the colonies strung out from New England to South Carolina. In this development, the educated minorities in the several colonies obviously played a major role. Their usage was imitated by speakers of English folk dialects, many of whom had some familiarity with it when they arrived on this side of the Atlantic. It can be safely assumed that within a century—say by 1725 or 1750—each of the major colonies had a distinct regional adaptation of Standard British English, which underlies the several regional dialects of American English of today.

Another factor that favoured the adoption of SBE must not be overlooked. Close ties with England were maintained by many of the leading families in the several colonies at least until the War of Independence—witness the considerable number of royalists who left the colonies that were to become the United States. Cultural as well as commercial connexions, centred in the seaports, facilitated the importation of eighteenth-century innovations in cultivated British speech, notably the loss of postvocalic [r] as such and the consequent addition of a unit to the vowel system—the syllabic phoneme exemplified in *far*, *hard*.

II

It has been pointed out above, (1) that all varieties of American English have essentially the same phonemic system and the same morphological and syntactic structure, and (2) that these systematic features agree with those of Standard British English. If that is granted, differences between the regional dialects of AE and BE are largely non-structural. In phonology, shared phonemes could be articulated differently (i.e. differ phonically), or they could appear in different words (i.e. differ in lexical incidence). In morphology, there could be differences in the realization of a shared grammatical category, say of the preterite, as in *ate* ~ *et* or *dived* ~ *dove*

Phonic differences in the realization of shared phonemes are a striking phenomenon in American English. Though most prominent in folk speech, they are widespread in regional cultivated speech.

For the discussion that follows I shall use the scheme of syllabic phonemes that I have presented and discussed in previous publications.¹ According to this scheme, the stressed vowels fall into two categories: checked and free. The checked vowels, as in *bit*, *bet*, *bat*, *hot*, *hut*, *foot*, occur only before consonants; on the other hand, the free vowels, as in *bee-beat*, *bay-bait*, *buy-bite*, *boy-boil*, *do-mood*, *no-note*, *law-bought*, *now-out*, *fur-burn*, and *car-cart*, can end a word or morpheme or be followed by a consonant.

Of the two categories of stressed syllabics, the free vowels exhibit the widest range of phonic variants in the eastern United States. Thus the phoneme /e/ of *bay*, *bait* has regional diaphones ranging from upgliding [ɛ̠ ~ ɛ̠] to monophthongal or ingliding [e̠ ~ e̠^ə]; the phoneme /o/ of *no*, *note* is realized as [ɔ̠ ~ ɔ̠ ~ ɔ̠ ~ ɔ̠^ə], the /u/ of *do*, *mood* as [ʊ̠ ~ ʊ̠ ~ ʊ̠ ~ ʊ̠^ə], the /ɔ/ of *law*, *bought* as [ɔ̠ ~ ɔ̠^ə ~ ɔ̠ ~ ɔ̠^ə]. The phoneme /ai/ of *buy*, *bite* ranges phonically from [aɪ ~ a̠^ɛ] to [a̠] and [ʌɪ ~ ʌ̠], the /au/ of *now*, *out* from [aʊ ~ a̠ʊ] to [æ̠ ~ ɛ̠ ~ əʊ]. The syllabic /ɜ/ of *fur*, *burn* has perhaps the widest range of regional and social diaphones, being articulated with more or less constriction of the body of the tongue, i.e. as [ɜ̠ ~ ɜ̠], or as an unconstricted mid-central monophthong [ɜ̠ ~ ɜ̠] or a diphthong [ɜ̠].

In the checked vowels, phonic differences are less pronounced, but the /æ/ of *bad*, *ashes* and the /ʌ/ of *sun* exhibit rather marked regional diaphones.

It is important to note that most of the diaphones mentioned above exhibit more or less clear-cut regional (or social) dissemination patterns. They are not random variations, but constitute characteristic aspects of the several regional dialects of American English. If we recognize them as such, as we must, we are faced with the problem of accounting for their origin and their survival.

Let us first consider the rather widely held view that American pronunciation reflects an earlier stage of Standard British English. This view rests primarily upon the notion that colonial dialects are naturally conservative because their contacts with the innovating centre of the standard language are loosened or broken. The archaic character of Icelandic as compared with the Norwegian dialects is usually cited in support of this theory. But is Icelandic typical? Are not the conservative features of American English counterbalanced by American innovation and by conservative features of British English that do not survive on this side of the Atlantic?²

We may, then, concede that certain regional diaphones of some shared phonemes could reflect earlier stages in the pronunciation of SBE. But most of the regional diaphones, so securely mapped on the basis of the collections of the Linguistic Atlas of the Eastern States, cannot come from that source. Even a cursory inspection of the variants illustrated above should make that clear.

When we raise the question as to whether some of the American diaphones reflect regional differences in the pronunciation of SBE current during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the British Isles, we must freely grant that possibility. But what is the evidence? Sub-phonemic variants would not be conveyed by the spelling. Orthoepists

might comment on some of them in their obscure ways. Hence little can be learned from these sources. Only a field survey of British folk speech of the present day could throw some light on possible regional diaphones of SBE current during the time when colonies were planted in America.

Fortunately a close phonic recording of the folk dialects of England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland has either been carried out or is now in progress. Moreover, for parts of England some of the findings have already been published by Harold Orton and his associates. Students of American English are eagerly looking forward to the speedy publication of the survey of the Midlands, which apparently has made a major contribution to the phonic character of the syllabic phonemes of AE. For the time being, G. S. Lowman's wide-meshed survey of the South Midland area fills in some of the gaps.³

It would be premature to pin-point the British sources of many a regional diaphone of AE at this time. Among other things, we should have at least a tentative analysis of the vowel systems of the major dialectal types. At the present time we are constrained to operate on a purely phonic basis. Nevertheless I shall venture to point out a number of plausible connexions.

It is noteworthy that the phonic realization of the several phonemes in Standard British English is always more or less widely current in American English, even if their dialectal basis is rather narrowly circumscribed. On the other hand, diaphones that are characteristic of British folk dialects over large areas are apt to survive in one dialect area or another of the Atlantic states. We shall content ourselves with a few fairly clear examples, relying for England primarily on Lowman's survey (footnote 3) and for America on Kurath and McDavid's *The Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States* (footnote 1). References in parentheses refer to maps in this publication.

(1) The free vowel /e/ of *lane*, *apron*, *day* is articulated as an upgliding diphthong [eɪ ~ əɪ] in SBE, which has its basis in the folk speech of the eastern counties of England. This diaphone of /e/ is current with varying frequency in most parts of the eastern United States (Maps 18 and 19). An ingliding diphthong [eə] in checked position is characteristic of the speech of coastal South Carolina, one of the old focal areas. This regional diaphone of /e/ has its counterpart in the folk speech of the west of England and of the counties adjoining the Wash (Norfolk, Cambridge, Lincoln), its obvious source. The South Carolinian [eə] has the monophthongal allophone [eː] in free position, which may well come from the imported [eə]. Monophthongal [eː] scattered along Chesapeake Bay and in eastern North Carolina is probably derived from the same British source.

(2) The American diaphones of the free vowel /o/ of *stone*, *coat*, *clothes* clearly have an analogous history. The upgliding [ou ~ ɔu ~ ɔ̥u] of SBE and the folk dialects of parts of eastern England are widely current in the Atlantic states (Maps 20 and 21). Ingilding [oə], varying positionally with monophthongal [oː], characterize the low-country of South Carolina; and the monophthongal diaphone [oː] survives to some extent in eastern Virginia and North Carolina. The British background is unmistakable: ingilding [oə ~ uə] are the regular reflexes of ME /ō/ in the folk speech of the western counties and of Norfolk and Suffolk.

(3) In SBE the syllabic /au/ of *now*, *out* is articulated as [au ~ ɔu], and this sound has extensive currency in America, especially from Pennsylvania northward (Maps 28 and 29). In the southern states the diaphone [æʊ] predominates on all social levels, unless a voiceless consonant follows. This phonic type is widely current in the folk speech of eastern England (including the London area) and presumably underlies southern usage. A third diaphone, [əu ~ ʌu], regularly appears before voiceless consonants in Virginia and in coastal South Carolina. It has its counterpart in the dialects of western England and East Anglia. In New England the diaphones [æʊ] and [əu ~ ʌu] survive only in old-fashioned speech. They do not occur in positional distribution, which may be an American innovation of Virginia and South Carolina speech.

(4) The diaphones of the syllabic /ai/ of *buy*, *bite* exhibit regional dissemination patterns similar to those of /au/ (Maps 26 and 27). The diaphones [ai ~ ɔi], corresponding to SBE usage, predominate from Pennsylvania northward. South of Pennsylvania, "slow" rising diphthongs [aː^ε ~ ɔː^ε] or ingilding [aː^ə ~ ɔː^ə] are widely current, but their British background is yet to be determined. The diaphone [əi ~ ɛi] is regularly used before voiceless consonants in Virginia and coastal South Carolina, but appears in old-fashioned New England speech without positional restriction. Since this phonic type is characteristic of East Anglian and western folk speech, its British background is hardly subject to doubt.

In this brief paper my chief purpose has been to illustrate by a number of examples that subphonemic regional features of American pronunciation are in part traceable to British regional folk speech of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. To the historian of American English this is an important problem. His hope is that the current surveys of the folk dialects of the British Isles will provide him with evidence which will enable him to reach back into the past in his attempt to unravel some of the strands that link American English with the several types of British English brought to the American continent.

NOTES

- ¹ H. Kurath and R. I. McDavid, Jr., *The Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States* (Ann Arbor, 1961), pp. 3-8.
- H. Kurath, *A Phonology and Prosody of Modern English* (Heidelberg and Ann Arbor, 1964), pp. 17-20.
- H. Kurath, "British Sources of Selected Features of American Pronunciation: Problems and Methods," *In Honour of Daniel Jones*, ed. D. B. Fry and others (London, 1964), pp. 146-55.
- ² A. Baugh, *A History of the English Language*, 2nd ed., rev. (London, 1959), pp. 416 ff., offers a judicious consideration of this subject.
- ³ Lowman's field records are part of the collections of the Linguistic Atlas, now in the charge of R. I. McDavid, Jr. at the University of Chicago. Made in 1937-38, they represent all the counties of England south of a line running from Lincolnshire to Worcestershire. Lowman received his intensive phonetic training under the direction of Daniel Jones at University College, London.