Language Ideology in the United States: Migration, Local Identity, and Discrimination

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Abstract
Dialect prejudice is alive and well in the United States and few groups are more stigmatized than Southern Americans. As a native of the Deep South, I travelled to the upper Midwest for work. As a well-educated member of the upper middle class, I did not anticipate the reception I received. As long as I didn’t speak, I was greeted with friendliness and smiles – in other words, I ‘passed.’ When I spoke, I discovered that I was an alien, a stranger, a foreigner in a land that was largely unprepared to accept those who can’t or won’t linguistically assimilate.

How do we use language features to mark those who ‘aren’t from around here?’ How closely linked are the notions of local identity, dialect, and the outsider? What does this mean for speakers of non-standard dialects as they move into regions where the prestige norm is spoken? Rosina Lippi-Green writes, “Accent discrimination can be found everywhere in our daily lives. In fact, such behavior is so commonly accepted, so widely perceived as appropriate, that it must be seen as the last back door to discrimination.”¹ This paper will look at Dennis Preston’s work in dialect perception in the United States, and the language subordination model as outlined by Lippi-Green. I will offer my own experience as a case study in migration-related language ideology, and support my claims of prejudice with corroborating evidence from other accounts, both contemporary and historical, of Southerners in the American Midwest.

Key Words: Dialects, dialect prejudice, language ideology, migration, Southern American English.

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1. What is dialect-based prejudice and how does it begin?

Dialects form based on a number of factors; some language-internal, some language-external. David Crystal writes, “Any language with a reasonably large number of speakers will develop dialects, especially if there are geographical barriers separating groups of people from each other, or if there are divisions of social class” (136). Once the division according to region or class has been created, perceptions develop associated with the
speakers of any given dialect – this one is spoken by people in fine clothes who live in fancy houses and send their children to the best schools, that one is spoken by people who dress shabbily, live in squalor and send their children to sub-standard schools if at all. Ultimately, the differences in speech, be they phonetic, lexical or syntactic, will mark the speakers as members of a particular regional or social group. Walt Wolfram writes, Region is more than physical location; it also has social meaning in terms of grounding people’s identities in localized communities. Dialect may symbolically mark people’s regional and social identity in a way that is similar to other kinds of cultural behaviors associated with social grouping. For example, dialect may be used to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, may emblematically mark social place, and may help construct a sense of local community (163-4) (emphasis added.)

In other words, we are comforted when we are surrounded by people who “sound like us.” In terms of regional dialect, we might see it in this way: This place is home and home means security and security means that things don’t change. A dichotomy begins to form: People who sound like me are a part of my home, my local identity, and that is good. People who don’t sound like me are not part of my home – their home is elsewhere and the characteristics of that home place, including dialect, could threaten the local identity of my home. There are certainly other ways of identifying an outsider. If my features are fair and yours are dark, I may assume that our ancestors are not from the same place – this makes you an outsider. If I dress in a certain manner, or eat certain food that seems foreign to you – perhaps I am the outsider. In the United States, we say that we do not discriminate based on race, creed, or color. If we control for race, creed, color, and sexual preference, can prejudice still exist – and upon what might it be based? This paper explores the nature of discrimination based on regional accent and its effects on the migrating human animal.

2. A Brief Look at Southern Out-Migration

What is the only good thing to come out of the South? An empty Greyhound Bus.

Timothy Frazer, author of “The Language of Yankee Cultural Imperialism: Pioneer Ideology and ‘General American,’” writes that as the New England “Yankees” moved into the American Midwest in the mid-to-late 1800’s, “they encountered others – Southerners, European immigrants, Mexican Americans – whom they regarded as inferior. Yankee-Southerner tensions
were common in frontier Illinois and Indiana” (62). In what was called “The Northwest,” communities passed laws designed to prevent the undesirable “others” from buying land – ensuring a safely homogenous local identity.

Chad Berry, in his book *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles*, chronicles the struggles of Southerners as they travelled north looking for work. His account of various waves of migration begins in the 1920’s and ends in the 1970’s. In the late 1920-30’s, Southerners came north to avoid the desperate poverty gripping the South during The Great Depression. In the 1940’s through the 1970’s, they came north as defense contractors (and later the automobile industry) needed to grow their workforce. The reception of these Southerners as they reached the Midwest varied little by all accounts from the 1870’s through the 1970’s and beyond.

In the American Midwest of the 1800’s, Southerners were clearly the outsiders, as all migrants are, and therefore, subject to the judgments of the communities in which they now found themselves. The *History of McLean County, Illinois* 1879, records that

> The southern part of the State was settled from the slave States, and this population brought their laws, customs, and institutions with them. A stream of population from the North poured into the northern part of the State. These sections misunderstood and hated each other perfectly. The Southerners regarded the Yankees as a skinning, tricky, penurious race of peddlers, filling the country with tinware, brass clocks, and wooden nutmegs. The Northerner thought of the Southerner as a lean, lank, lazy creature, burrowing in a hut, and rioting in whiskey, dirt, and ignorance. (97). (emphasis added)

Elmer Akers conducted a study of white southerners in Detroit in 1936. While most northerners of his day failed to perceive a difference between subcultures within the South, Akers did. Chad Berry writes that Akers was able to distinguish between the “rigidly truthful, scornful of charity, clannish, [and] proud”’ mountaineer and the ‘lazy, shiftless, untrustworthy, slovenly, and devoid of self-respect’ lowlanders… Akers was also an early writer to raise the specter of maladjustment among migrants, an ascribed characteristic that would haunt southerners throughout the century.” [Akers reports:]

> Our impression is that the sense of inferiority has stronger sway over their conduct than has any genuine pride…This characteristic of mind and personality, combined with a pitifully meager education and almost total unfamiliarity with the ways and demands of a high-speed industrial society makes their difficulties of accommodation in Detroit almost insuperably great (50).
Berry further writes that Southerners were considered to be bad customers by grocers and druggists, and bad tenants by landlords, one of whom posted a sign reading “No Southerners,” and said, “If you once let southerners into your house you can hardly rent it to any other class of people, because southerners let it get so dirty and run-down…On some streets they just won’t rent their properties to them. I’m not prejudiced. I’m just telling you the facts” (51). Another stated, “We’d rather rent to a Negro, a Mexican, or a Filipino than to a white person from the South. A good clean colored person is a better tenant than a southern white anymore” (75).

Despite the fact that Southerners owned homes, attended churches and held down well-paying jobs, the stereotypes persisted. In 1958, Harper’s magazine printed an article by Albert Votaw entitled, “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago.” It begins with the following: “The city’s toughest integration problem has nothing to do with Negroes… It involves a small army of white, Protestant, Early American migrants from the South – who are usually proud, poor, primitive, and fast with a knife.” Mr. Votaw portrays all Southern migrants as “anti-social to the point of delinquency,” and “prone to disease but fearful of authority.” The children are academically handicapped and perpetually shoeless, the women often remove window screens in their dilapidated homes and “sit half-dressed where it is cooler, and dispose of garbage in the quickest way.” The men will “gather with friends, noisily, in the one institution they have originated up North – the hillbilly tavern.” His conclusion was that these people were a disgrace to the Anglo-Saxon race. They were, in fact, “the American dream gone berserk.” Berry concluded that,

Southern whites who came north brought a certain amount of independence with them, and because of it, they were often scorned by those unsympathetic to their plights and stereotyped even by those who were more understanding…. One could argue that southern whites were scorned as much as, if not more than, foreign immigrants or African Americans were because they were presumed to be “American” and their shortcomings and differences with “mainstream” American culture made them unacceptable (49-50).

3. How to Spot a Southerner.

*Why did the hillbilly Christmas pageant organizer dress the wise men in firefighting gear? Because they had come from a far.*
Like all dialect forms of all human languages, there are characteristic linguistic features present in the dialect of Southern Americans. Of course, like all dialect groups, Southern American English (SAE) is richly diverse—with that diversity being based on a number of factors including region, gender, age, and social class to name a few. Even though there is a tremendous difference between the dialect spoken by an upper-class woman living on The Battery in Charleston, South Carolina, and a lower-class man living in a trailer in rural Mississippi, many non-Southerners cannot distinguish between them. The features most common to the majority of the speakers of SAE are phonetic, lexical and syntactic in nature.

Lexically, few features are more marked than the 2nd person plural pronoun, *ya’ll* (short for *you all*). Although this pronoun is specific to the Deep South, its use has been attributed to more northerly dialects of SAE which actually use the similar *y’uns* (short for *you ones*). The most marked features of SAE syntax are all related to its verbal system. SAE has a specific-use future tense marker, *fixin’ to*, as in *I’m fixin’ to go to the store*, for *I am about to go to the store*. Another marked feature of SAE syntax is its use of double modal constructions, such as *I might should get out of bed now*, or *You might could go to the party, if you get a ride*. Although a Southerner outside the South might mask lexical and syntactic features in an effort to “accommodate” a non-Southern listener, masking phonetic features is much more complicated and difficult—and often not possible. One of the most common phonetic features of SAE (and one which seems to be spreading rapidly) is the monophthong [ai] sound, illustrated in the joke above. It is easy to confuse *fire* with *far* in this context because the diphthong [ai], as in *white*, *rice*, and *fire*, is reduced to only [a]—and it is a classic telltale sign that the speaker is from the South.

While these features may be perceived by non-Southerners as stigmatized indicators of regional origin, they are also badges worn by migrating Southerners as markers of their own local identity—as markers of belonging to a community which has been left behind. These features betray Southern migrants as being from the South, but they also make it possible for Southern migrants to identify each other and build supportive communities while they are far from home. In this respect, local identity can be interpreted as previous local identity—different, but important to our understanding of community nonetheless.

4. Dialect-based Discrimination?

*Accent accentuates difference where there is supposed to be commonality; it testifies to an inability or unwillingness to go along, to fit in... A Southern accent is often understood, inside the South as well as beyond its borders, as
a symbol of poor education, low ambition, and reactionary politics.
-- Edward L. Ayers (71).

One hundred plus years of accounts of Southern migrants in the North shows little variation. The attitude toward them is disdainful, untrusting and in many cases, hostile – and yet, they are recognized as being what Votaw called “the prototype of what the “superior” American should be, [sic] white Protestants of early American, Anglo-Saxon stock”

These people were what William Philliber and Clyde McCoy called “The Invisible Minority,” visibly indistinguishable from the prestige norm in the same way a person of color would be. Certainly, if Mr. Votaw is to be believed, they distinguished themselves by their shabby dress and their unruly conduct – but what of those who held down jobs, went to church, and cleaned their houses? Did they suffer scrutiny? In other words, what happens to speakers of non-standard dialects when they migrate into areas where the prestige norm is spoken, and that is their only appreciable difference?

Elmer Akers wrote that a certain employer “got tired of seeing southerners. You can tell a southerner as soon as he opens his mouth, you know, if not by appearance” (Berry: 47). (Emphasis added) Berry recorded an interview with a Southern migrant from 1974: “But you had to constant be on your toes, have your guard up, for southern language you used, because if you spilled some of it out … why some northern person grab it and poke fun at you immediately… The North was as much or more critical of southern people than southern people has ever been of northern people. And to my opinion it still exists…we suffered a lot by being from the South” (88).

In 1977, Jane Appleby delivered a paper at the South Atlantic Modern Language Association convention in Atlanta, GA. She opened her speech with the following story:

Years ago, during my first week in Wisconsin, I was asked by a fellow teacher, “Do you mean they let you teach English?” The speaker was a Canadian with what I thought a very peculiar accent. Soon after that, a woman working on a degree in speech asked me with all the kindness and gentleness of which she was capable whether I would let her teach me how to talk right. If I had had her zeal and patience and kindness, I might very well have made the offer first, for I thought her speech highly unsatisfactory…. (225)

Lippi-Green relays the following story of an unnamed academic interviewing with an elite college from the northeast for a job teaching foreign language: “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 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” (210).

My own story is quite similar to all the Southern migrants who have preceded me. Within the safe confines of the South, I lived a privileged life as a well-educated member of the upper middle class from generations of well-connected people – and a white, Protestant of Northern European decent. I did not anticipate the welcome I received by much of my new Midwest community. When my husband and I tried to buy a home, the owner wouldn’t work with us because “people like that don’t qualify for loans.” (We had already qualified for the loan.) The cable television repairman warned us not to speak to the call center in South Carolina because, “They don’t speak English down there.” My dental hygienist said to me, “The University hired you to teach with that accent?? Don’t you want to clean that up?” A fellow Southerner came up to me at work and said, “If you haven’t figured it out already, it’s real hard to be Southern up here.”

Since Appleby and the unnamed source quoted by Lippi-Green were surprised by their reception, I assume that they, like me, had no background in experiencing prejudice prior to their reported incidents. In my own case, race, religion, sexual orientation, and ethnic origin have all been controlled for – none of the typical hot buttons of prejudice apply and, therefore, they can all be ruled out as causes of the discrimination. Dennis Preston’s work with dialect perception in the United States proves that there is still a very hefty price to pay for being a Southerner outside the South: “Northerners still know that Southerners are a slow, healthy, racist, conservative, anti-intellectual, Protestant lot” (24). In sum, Lippi-Green writes, “Without accent, it would not be 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 culture attached to it. Nevertheless, the process continues” (216).

With what does this leave us in the way of an understanding of migration and discrimination? Variations in skin color can certainly be quick and easy indicators that two people don’t share the same ethnic origin. However, migration has created the situation where people of different skin colors can live in the same neighborhood, shop at the same stores, and send their children to the same school – in other words, assuming they agree on all or most of the characteristics of what it means to be “from here,” they can create a shared local identity. As established ethnically diverse areas become
more commonplace, the quickest indicator of an outsider will very likely shift from the visual to the auditory – exposing speakers of non-prestige dialects as they move into areas where their language is neither understood nor welcomed.

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