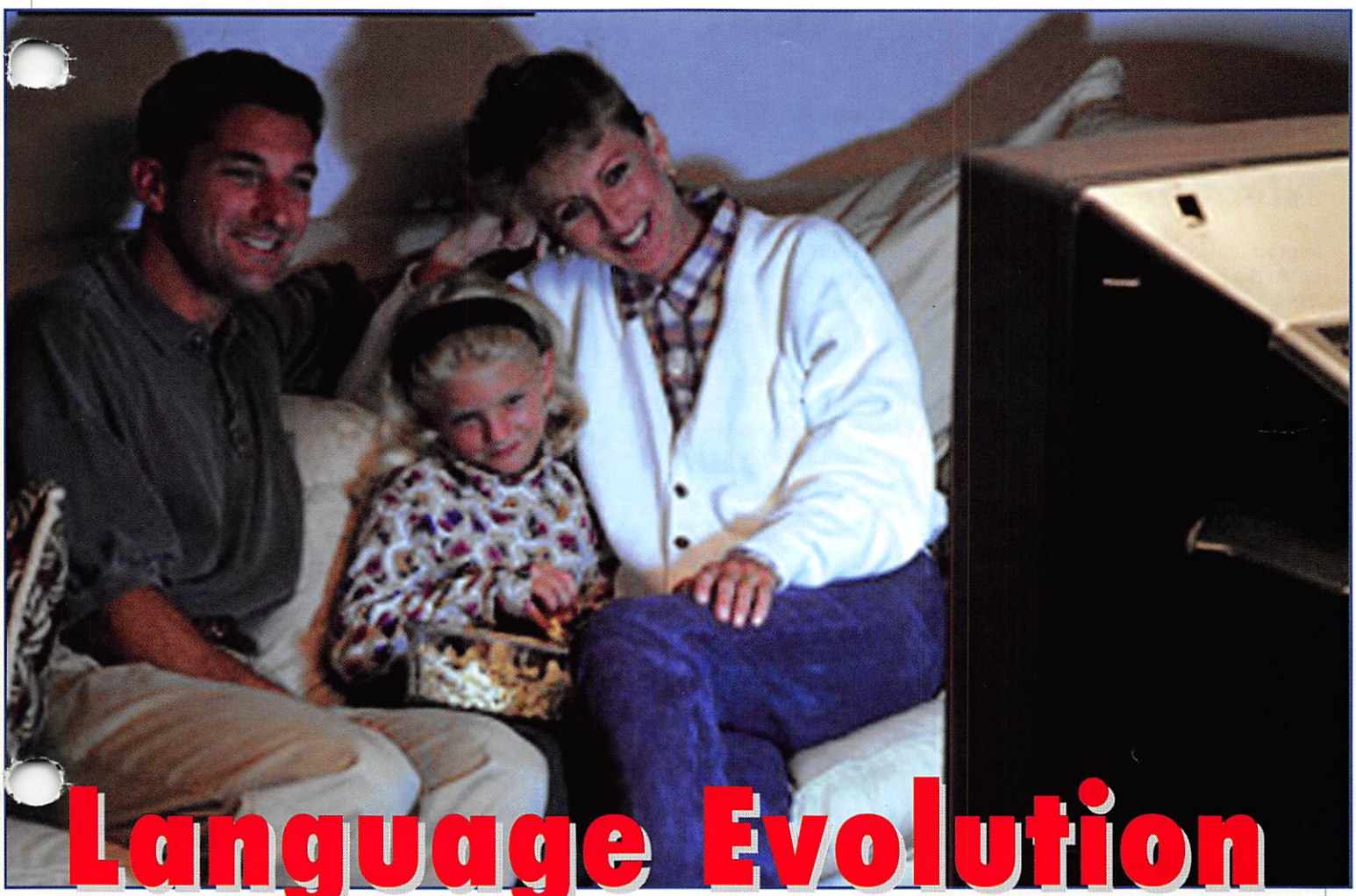
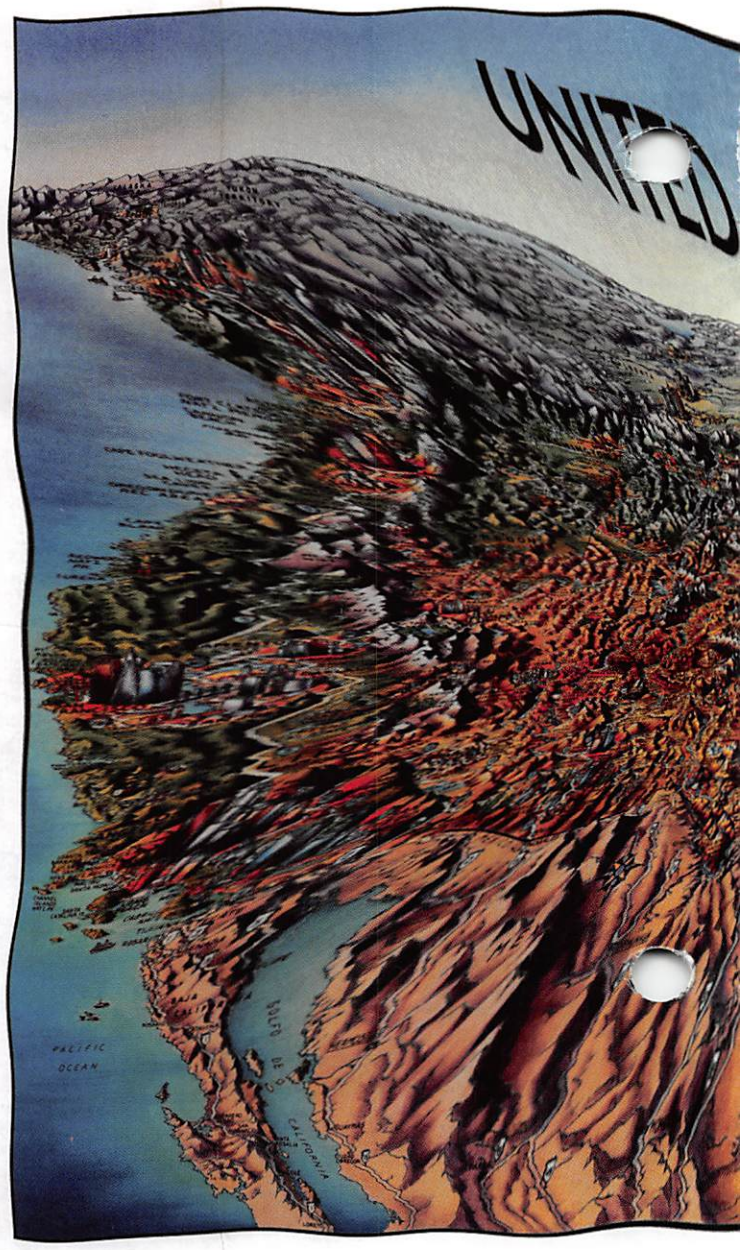


Language Evolution Or Dying Traditions?

Most people find dialects intriguing. At the same time, they have lots of questions about them and often have strong opinions as well. Probably the most common question we encounter about the condition of American dialects is, "Are American dialects dying, due to television and the mobility of the American population?" Certainly, media, transportation, and technology have radically compressed the geography of the United States and altered American lifestyles over the last century. So what effects do these significant changes have on America English dialects? What about the future of American dialects as English assumes a global role? **Walt Wolfram** and **Natalie Schilling-Estes** discuss:

The State of American Dialects

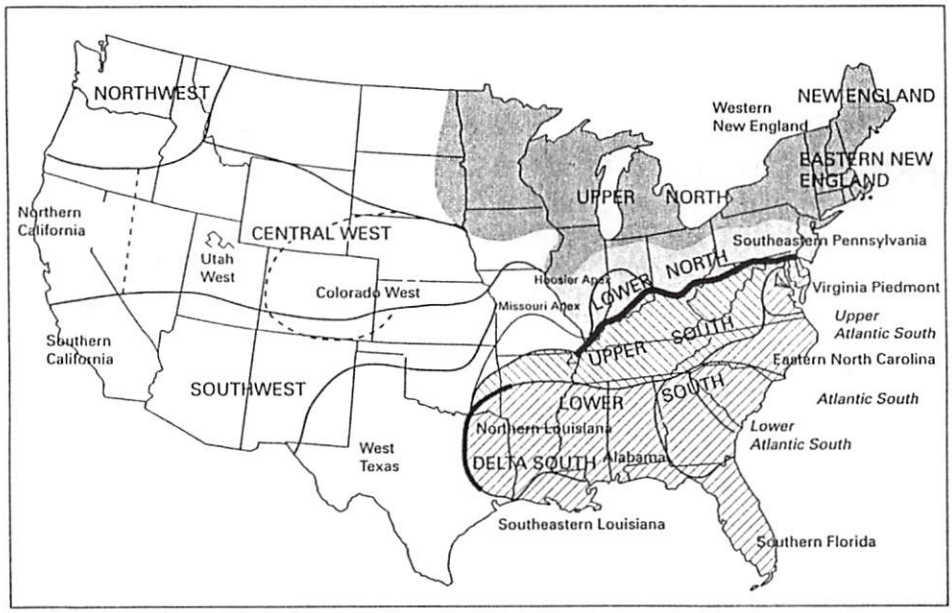


Basic Dialects of American English

The methodical collection of data on regional dialect variation in America began in earnest in the 1930s when the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada was launched and dialectologists began conducting large-scale surveys of regional dialect differences. This effort was buoyed in the 1960s through an extensive national survey that has now led to the publication of the first several volumes of the six-volume *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cassidy 1985, 1991, 1996), the premier reference work on regional American English dialectology. These surveys focused on the regional vocabulary of older lifetime residents of rural areas and so captured a picture of dialect differences as they existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The result was a number of useful dialect maps of the primary and secondary dialect areas of the mainland US, including the one featured below.

To a large extent, traditional dialect divisions in the US reflect differences first established in Colonial America by people from different parts of the British Isles. These differences were cemented in early cultural hubs such as Richmond, Philadelphia, Boston, and Charleston and later diffused outward as English speakers moved inland. But do these differences still hold at the beginning of the twenty-first century, after a century of demographic shifts, economic growth, and sociocultural change? Linguist William Labov and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania are currently conducting an extensive telephone survey of dialect pronunciations throughout the US. Though still ongoing, his survey reaffirms the persistence of the same major dialect boundaries that were established in earlier studies. However, Labov's research reveals more than the mere maintenance of fundamental dialect boundaries; it shows that in some ways the major dialects of the US are actually becoming more different from one another rather than more alike.

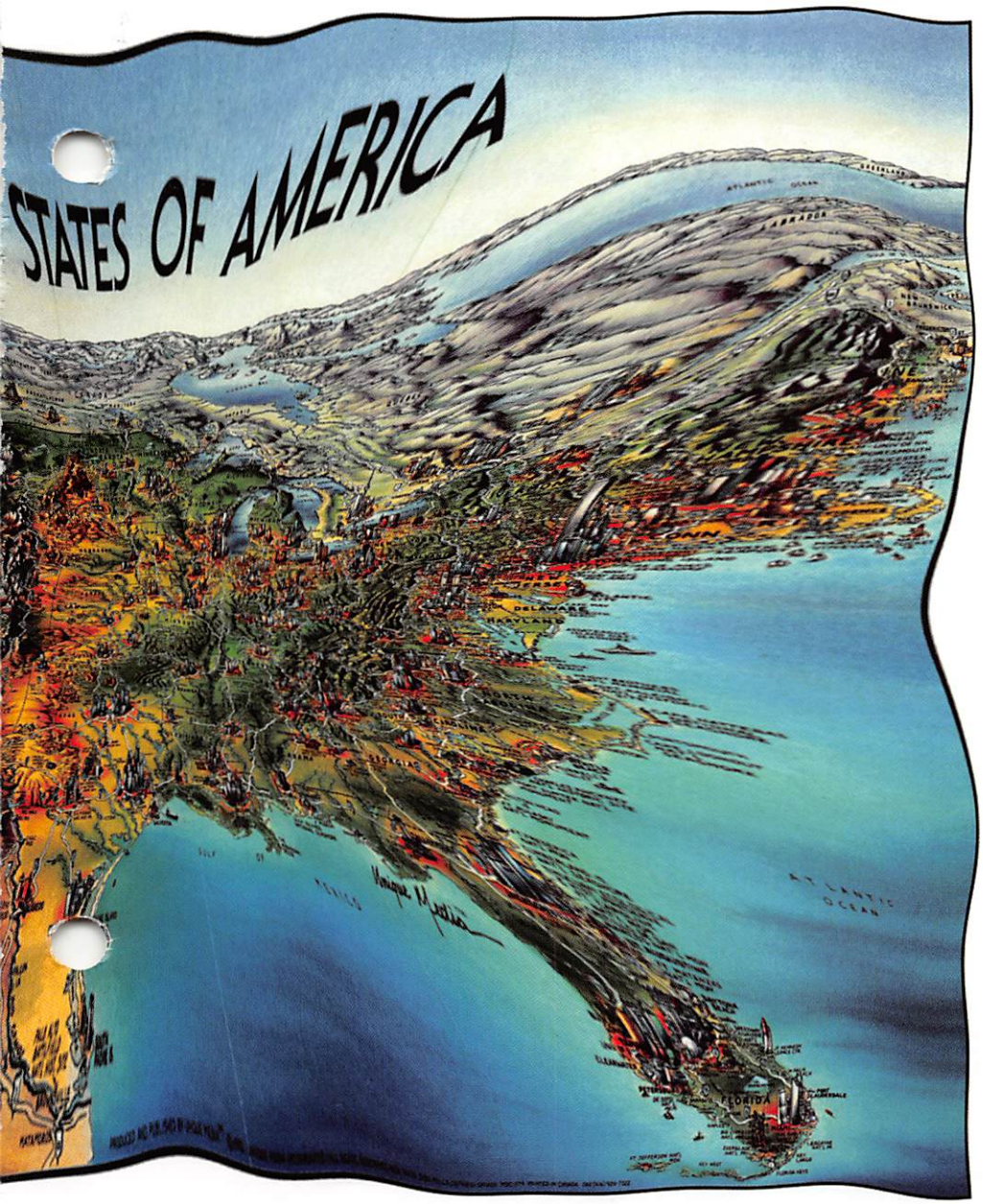
In large Northern cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo, certain vowel pronunciations are changing in ways that distance them from Southern vowels. For example, the *augh* sound of a word like *caught* is now pronounced more like the vowel of *cot*. Meanwhile, a word like *lock* sounds something like *lack*, while *tack* sounds a little like *tech*. At the same time, Southern vowels are changing in different ways. For example, *red* sounds something like *raid*, and *fish* sounds almost like *feesh*. So much for the presumed homogenization of Northern and Southern speech.

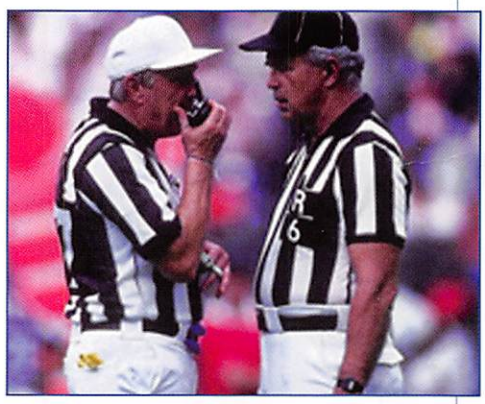


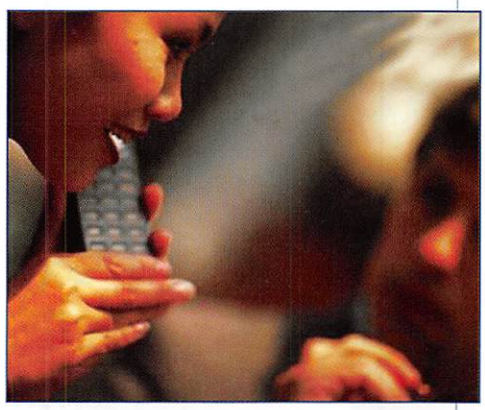
[from Carver, C. (1987) *American Regional Dialects: A Word Geography* (University of Michigan Press, p. 248]

Changing Trends in Dialects

The continuity and enhancement of basic dialect boundaries during a century of demographic and social change is certainly a feature story, but there are some sidebars that point to change in the dialects of American English as well. Several factors have had a significant impact on the repositioning of American English dialects at the turn of the millenium. These include changing patterns of immigration and language contact within the US, shifting patterns of interregional movement within the US, and expanded transportation and communication networks. To go along with these demographic and technological developments, changes in social structure and cultural values have affected the development of dialects.







"'Are American dialects dying, due to television and the mobility of the American population?' Certainly, media, transportation, and technology have radically compressed the geography of the United States and altered American lifestyles over the last century."

Language Contact

One of the factors that has always contributed to the distinctive flavor of American English stems from the influence of other languages, from the earliest Native American influences on the vocabulary of ...eral American English (e.g. *raccoon*, *moccasin*, *pecan*, etc.), to the later influence of Scandanavian languages on the pronunciations of the Upper Midwest, to the influence of African languages on Ebonics. But the languages influencing American English change as the cultural mix changes.

The languages of more recent immigrant populations from Asia and different areas of the Hispanic world are now affecting English just as various European languages have done throughout the history of the US. Furthermore, new ethnic varieties of English are arising from more recent language contact situations. For example, there are various types of Hispanic English in regions of the Southwest and Southeast with heavy concentrations of Hispanics. And these dialects are spoken not only by those who learn English as a second language but by those whose first and primary language is English as well.

Long-established ethnic varieties also change, as patterns of contact among ethnic groups shift. The desegregation of ethnic communities is an on-going process in American society that continually brings speakers of different groups into closer contact. However, the result of contact is not always the erosion of ➡ to page 17

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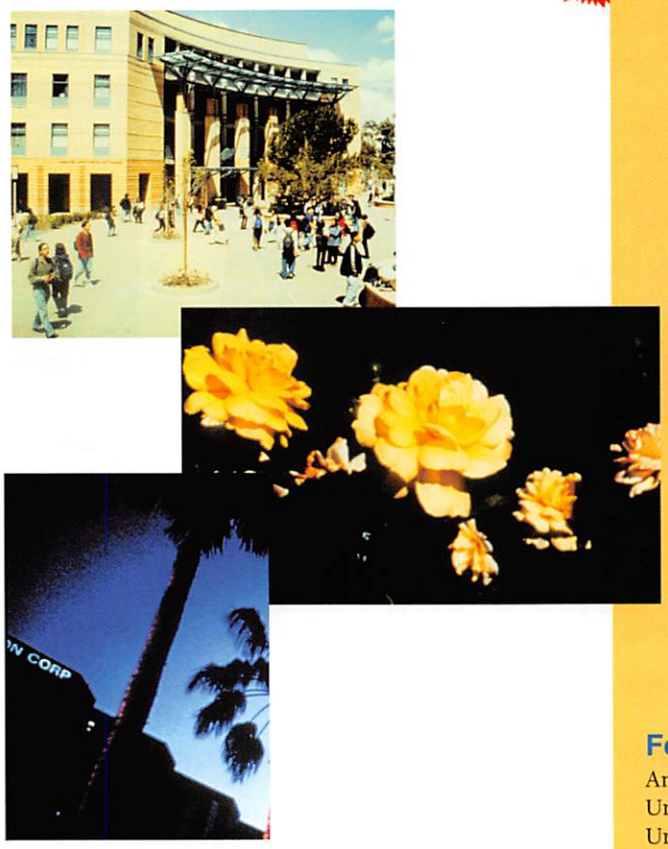

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ethnic dialect boundaries. ...olinguistic distinctiveness can be remarkably persistent, even in face of sustained, daily inter-ethnic contact. Ethnic dialect varieties are a product of cultural and individual identity as well as a matter of simple contact. One of the dialect lessons of the twentieth century is that speakers of ethnic varieties like Ebonics not only have maintained but even enhanced their linguistic distinctiveness over the past half century. In addition, Ebonics has become a supra-regional dialect that unites African Americans across urban and rural areas that range from Boston to Los Angeles.

Population Movement

Dialect boundaries often follow the migratory routes of the major population movements. Historically, the significant migrations of English-speaking people in the U.S. have run along east-west lines. However, the last half of the twentieth century was characterized by some different patterns of population movement. For example, some areas of the South have been inundated by speakers from Midland and Northern dialect areas. At first glance, the effect of this trend seems enormous, especially in ...s such as Miami, Houston, and the ...leigh-Durham area of North Carolina, where Southerners are overwhelmed by non-Southerners to such a degree that it is becoming increasingly rare in these areas to locate young people with genuine "Southern accents." But there are also factors that work to counter the "dialect swamping" that may result from such situations.

Many Southerners view their dialect as a strong marker of regional identity and a source of cultural pride. Such feelings may help preserve certain dialect features even in the face of massive linguistic pressure from outside groups. Dialectologist Guy Bailey and his team of researchers have found that some Southern dialect features in Oklahoma and Texas, including the use of *fixin' to* in *They're fixin' to go the mall*, have persisted and even spread in the face of increasing settlement by non-Southerners. The nature of regionalized American English is certainly changing, but we can hardly say that regional dialect forms are subsiding.

Expanding Transportation and Communication Networks

...e broadening of transportation and communication networks throughout the twentieth century now provides access to even the most remote dialect areas. These locations were once the sites of some of America's most distinctive dialect traditions. A potential linguistic consequence of this increased accessibility is *dialect endangerment*, in which a distinctive variety spoken by relatively small numbers of people in a once-isolated community is overwhelmed by encroaching mainstream dialects. For example, a number of island communities on the eastern seaboard of the US are currently in grave danger of extinction. These communities have been transformed from small, self-contained marine-based communities into service-based tourist meccas in a matter of decades. The traditional dialect features of some of these communities are receding rapidly, often within a couple of generations. At the same time, though, some communities, or subgroups within a community, may maintain and even enhance certain noticeable dialect features in order to distinguish themselves from outsiders.

Shifting Cultural Centers

Throughout its history, the US has undergone a number of major population shifts as its economic and social structures have changed. In the process, its centers of cultural influence have shifted as well. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the major stream of population movement is no longer toward the heart of the city but into the suburbs. As cultural centers shift, so too does the locus of linguistic change. Important dialect changes often are now initiated in the suburbs, not the city proper. For example, sociolinguist Penelope Eckert of Stanford University has shown that some of the most innovative speakers in the North are suburban teens—not people from the middle of the city. In addition we find that dialect features may spread across geographic space in different ways. Whereas some dialect features may spread out from a central area in a fairly straightforward way, like ripples in a pond, others may "jump" from region to region. For example, the pronunciation changes affecting some Northern cities have been shown to spread from one major metropolitan area to another, skipping intervening areas of low population.

Populations in particular locales may also carve out new dialects as they develop a sense of regional identity. Many of the earliest maps of the United States show less dialect distinctiveness as we move from east to west, reflecting the relatively late arrival of English-speaking groups on the West Coast as well as increased dialect mixing during westward expansion. But this is changing. Linguists and non-linguists alike are recognizing quite distinctive dialects on the West Coast, including California English, whose influence has spread among young speakers throughout the US. One of the most distinctive features of this dialect (characterized in pop culture as "Valley Girl Talk" or "Valley Speak") is the pronunciation of statements with rising rather than falling intonation, so that a statement like *"We went to the movies yesterday"* sounds like a question: *We went to the movies yesterday?*

"Some dialect features may spread out from a central area in a fairly straightforward way, like ripples in a pond, others may 'jump' from region to region."

American Dialects in the New Millennium

Even as some traditional American dialects recede, new ones appear, reflecting the changing dynamics of American demography and social structure. But the present contours are deeply embedded in the historical origins of American English, and future developments no doubt will take their cues from the present dialect profile. Dialects mark the regional and cultural cartography of America as much as any cultural artifact, and there is no reason to expect that they will surrender their emblematic role in American life in the future.

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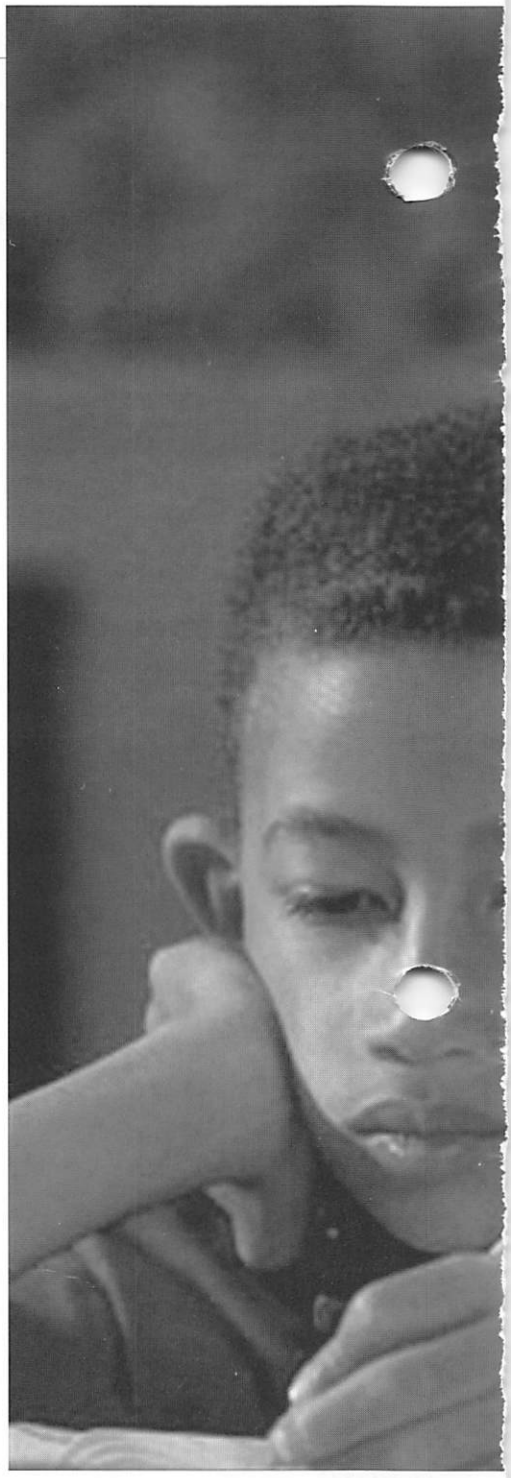
Walt Wolfram is the William C. Friday Distinguished Professor of English linguistics at North Carolina State University, and Natalie Schilling-Estes is a sociolinguist at Georgetown University. They are the authors of *American English: Dialects and Variation*.

New Accrediting Agency Is Providing Quality Assurance



The Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA) was incorporated as an independent accrediting agency for English language programs and institutions in the United States in October 1999. Accreditation is a process by which experts in a particular field determine common standards and choose to regulate themselves according to those standards. CEA's birth was a result of many years of interest and hard work by members of the TESOL profession. As a specialized agency, CEA meets the needs of the profession in providing a means to assure quality English language instruction in the U.S. and represents best practices in the field of accreditation. CEA has strong support in the community of interest, with over 70 English language programs and institutions currently seeking accreditation.

English language teaching professionals have discussed the need for an accrediting agency for many years. In the early 1990s, it appeared that the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was going to require the accreditation of independent English language schools and that it might also require accreditation for intensive English programs (IEPs) within accredited institutions. In response to a specific request by the American Association of Intensive English Programs (AAIEP), Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL) convened the Accreditation Task Force in 1993 to investigate the need and support for a specialized accrediting agency. Task force members represented AAIEP, NAFSA: Association of International Educators, TESOL, and the University and College Intensive English Programs (UCIEP). Two surveys to determine support for an accrediting agency were conducted. At the same time, TESOL contacted the U.S. Department of Education, Post-secondary Accreditation Evaluation Branch, to better understand requirements for recognition by that agency, and worked with accreditation consultants to establish a timeline and determine cost implications for the creation of an accrediting agency.

In 1995, the Task Force presented survey results to the TESOL Board and recommended that it would be feasible and desirable for TESOL to develop an accrediting agency. The Board approved the request and formed an Accreditation Advisory Committee. The charge was to draft standards and create the structure for an accrediting agency for intensive English programs in the U.S. Members of the committee represented both university/college-based and independent IEPs, as well as higher education in general, so that the standards would fulfill the needs of the various types of programs. An experienced accreditation consultant was engaged to help with the project. The Advisory Committee met three times a year from 1995 to 1997 and presented the first draft of proposed standards in March 1997. Input