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TAILPIECE

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Even before George Bernard Shaw transformed a poor flower girl into a fair lady, it was no secret that different English-speaking peoples do speak English very differently.

Almost from the start of the American colonies, in fact, there was fear that after Americans got through with it, English would sound like a tongue run over by a musical comedy. The fear has been somewhat justified.

Bostonians drop the *R* after some vowels, to say *Haavaad Yaao*, and add it after others, as in *Aunt Emmer*. Old Yankees with this trait gave the West some of its colourful words, such as *cuss* (for curse), *hoss* (for horse) and *gal* (for girl). Southerners, too, drop the *R*, and 'care' comes out *ca-yuh*.

In some locales, not only is the *R* dropped but a diphthong is inserted (to make *bird* sound like *boid*) and *T* and *D* are substituted for *Th*. When this all comes together south of *Toidy Toid* (33rd) Street in New York, the patois is called Brooklynese. But it's also heard in Charleston and around New Orleans.

Southerners do special things with double vowels, such as ignoring one of them, as President Jimmy Carter does in pronouncing oil as *ool*.

The last three words of the shibboleth, *will merry*

Mary marry? are all pronounced differently by some Southerners and all the same by many Midwesterners. The rest of America compromises and sounds two differently (as *merry Merry marry*).

These differences in the way Americans talk seem to be wearing away as do other aspects of dialect (word formation and syntax), toward the standard national blandness of a radio announcer. One way to preserve the distinctions may be to understand better how they originated, where they have been, and where they may be going.

The vernaculars went West with immigrants and are still found delineated by the old trails. North of the 40th parallel, more or less, from New York to Colorado, are those who pronounce greasy with the Z sound (as in *easy*), while to the south it rhymes with *messy*.

The same line roughly divides those who get *sick to the stomach* from those who get *sick at the stomach*, but beyond the Mississippi people also get *sick with*, *sick on* and *sick in* the stomach.

Dragon flies are called *darning needles*, *ear skewers*, *snake feeders*, *mosquito Hawks* and other things as you cross America, but only in northern California is a chest of drawers called a *chesterfield*.

Despite all these differences found between the Maine twang and the non-descript alloy of Californian speech, there is less diversification in English across the United States than across the much smaller British Isles. Cockney contrasts with upper-crust accents in London, and the various idioms of the Celtic fringe, from Cornwall around to Scotland, seem only vaguely related to English. The mellifluous sing-song dialect of a Welshman sounds more like Bombay than Oxford English.

The American way with phonics can usually be traced back to the British usage. It just happened that after being imported, many of the dialects have been maintained in the United States long after they lost fashion in Britian.

The speech patterns established in early colonial settlements 'had a profound and lasting effect on the nature of modern American dialects', Professor Carrol E. Reed wrote in *Dialects in American English*.

For a while, Americans were more English than the English in their talk. Colonists in the 1770s had 'the purest pronunciation of the English tongue found anywhere', one British visitor wrote.

No dialects existed, except in New England where 'a whining cadence' was noted, according to J.L. Dillard in *All American English.*

As late as 1793, visitors praised American English as being better spoken, from Quebec to Georgia, than in the different counties of England.

Within a half century, however, compliments turned to complaints about the 'barbarisms' in American pronunciations and grammar. The East Coast remained locked into old London Speech forms to some extent, while settlers further inland were north Englishmen or Scots-Irish from Ulster with their own flatter accents.

The biggest distinction between these coastal and inland settlements remains today in whether the *R* is pronounced before consonants and at the end of words. In southern England in the 17th Century, the era in which the American coastal settlements received most of their immigrants, it was fashionable to drop the *R*. These regions also maintained their contact with England longer than inland areas whose settlers pronounced their *R*s.

'By far the largest part of the United States today continues to use this *R* in all its forms. And this is a legacy of those former frontier settlements', Carroll Reed wrote.