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Overview of accent variation in the USA

Readings

- Ladefoged 'A Course in Phonetics', chapter 8

Describing English accents – Wells's Lexical Sets

- Northern /u/ and Californian /ʉ/ are corresponding vowels in the two accents because they generally occur in the same words, e.g. *who* [hu], [hʉ]

- So a convenient way to refer to vowel phonemes in describing accents is in terms of the words in which they appear.

- Wells (1982) proposes a set of keywords for referring to classes of words that (generally) share a vowel phoneme, e.g.
  - KIT, DRESS, TRAP, LOT, STRUT, etc.

- Note that this abstracts away from allophonic variation and contextual neutralization.

- It is an interesting fact that accents correspond in this way – what does it tell us about the nature of language change?

Describing English accents - an historical approach

Language change is a basic source of synchronic variation.

- A language change cannot occur simultaneously in the speech of all individuals in all places, so change inevitably gives rise to variation.

- Geographical variation: Even if we start from a uniform language, if different changes apply in different geographical areas, then we end up with geographical variation.

- Labov takes an explicitly historical approach to description of accents.

  - accents are described in terms of changes from an 'initial position' - Āour best estimation of the common base for American English dialects which resulted from the mixing of various English dialects in the 16th and 17th centuries

Labov et al – vowel classes

- Representation of vowels in the initial position of American English in Labov et al (1997, 2006)

nucleus	SHORT		Upgliding				Ingliding	
			Front upgliding		Back upgliding			
	V		Vy		Vw		Vh	
	front	back	front	back	front	back	unrounded	rounded
high	i	u	iy		iw	uw		
mid	e	ʌ	ey	oy		ow		oh
low	æ	o		ay		aw	ah	

- Short vowels are represented by single vowels
  - /o/ is usually [ɑ], generally from Middle English short /o/, not phonetically short in modern American dialects.
- High front offglides are generically transcribed as /y/, high back offglides as /w/
- /Vh/ indicates length or a central 'offglide' [ə]

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Regional accents in the USA

- Labov et al (2006) divide the USA into major dialect regions, grouped by distinctive combinations of shared sound changes - often sound changes in progress.

Labov et al (2006)
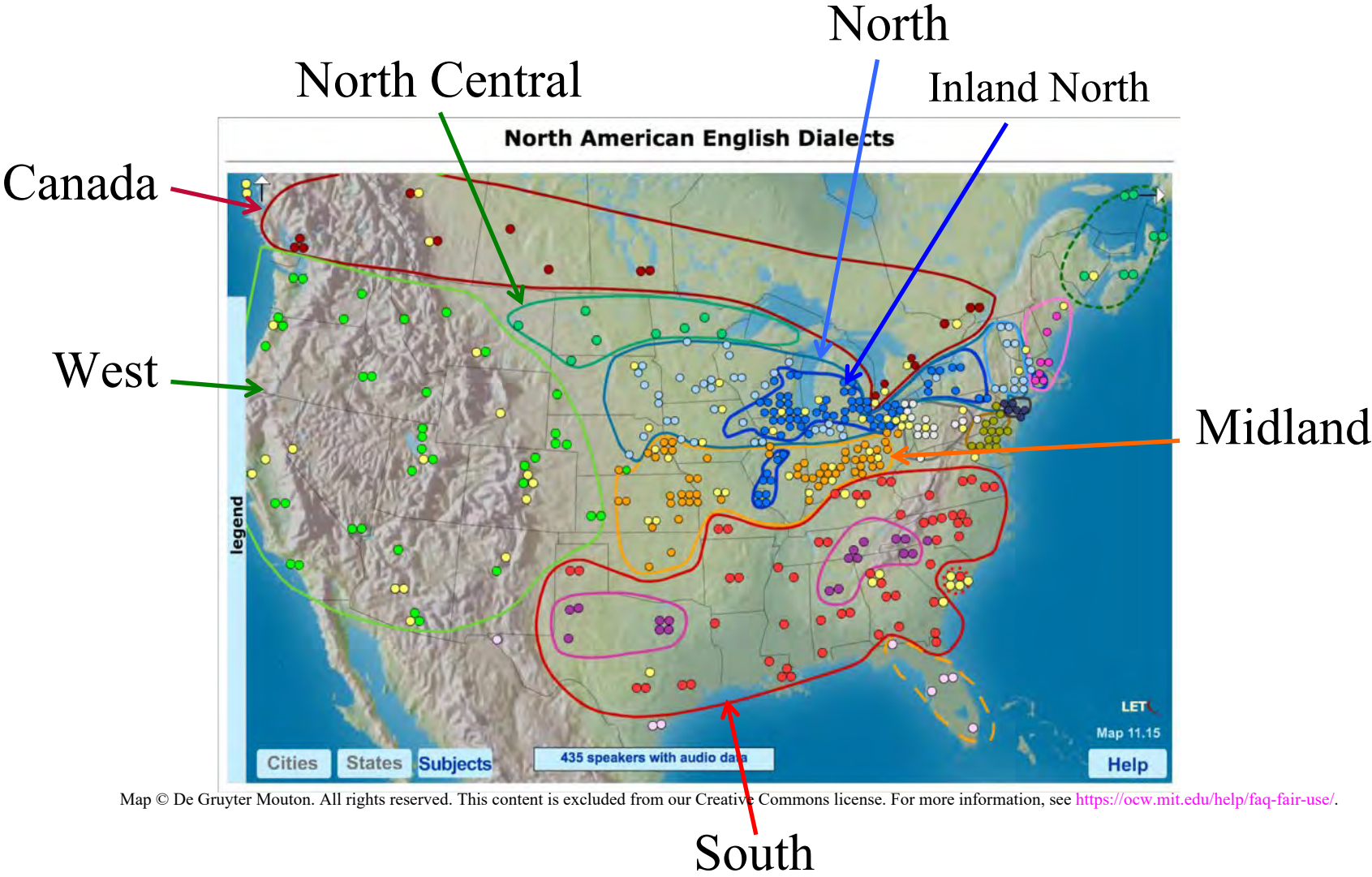
North American English Dialects

Labels: North Central, North, Inland North, Canada, West, Midland, South

The West

The West is primarily characterized three characteristics

- *Cot-caught* merger: /ɑ/, no /ɔ/

    – Spreading East through the midlands.

- Fronting of GOOSE vowel to [ʉ] (similar change in the South and elsewhere. Not in North)

- GOAT vowel is unfronted [oʊ]

    – cf. The South which has fronting of GOOSE and GOAT vowels (/uw, ow/).

The North

- Generally retains 'conservative' long /i, eɪ, u, oʊ/

- Inland North characterized by a **chain shift**, primarily involving historically lax vowels - Northern Cities Shift.

  - Change in progress, most advanced in major cities (Buffalo, Rochester, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Madison etc).

Northern Cities Shift

- Chain shift: a series of connected sound changes. Can result in wholesale rotations of portions of the vowel system.
    - Why do we observe chainshifts?

- Earliest stages:
  - fronting of LOT/PALM ɑ > a
    Buffalo [▶] Chicago [▶] Kenosha [▶]
  - tensing of TRAP æ > eæ/ɪɛ
    Buffalo [▶] Chicago [▶] Detroit [▶]
- More recent developments:
  - THOUGHT lowering/unrounding
    - ɔ > ɑ
    Rochester [▶]
  - STRUT /ʌ/ backing   Detroit [▶]
  - HEAD /ɛ/ backing   Detroit [▶]

The Northern Cities Shift

/iə/ idea — /i/ kid → 6

/e/ ked

/ʌ/ cud — 5 → /oh/ cawed

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/æ/ cad — 2 — /o/ cod — 3
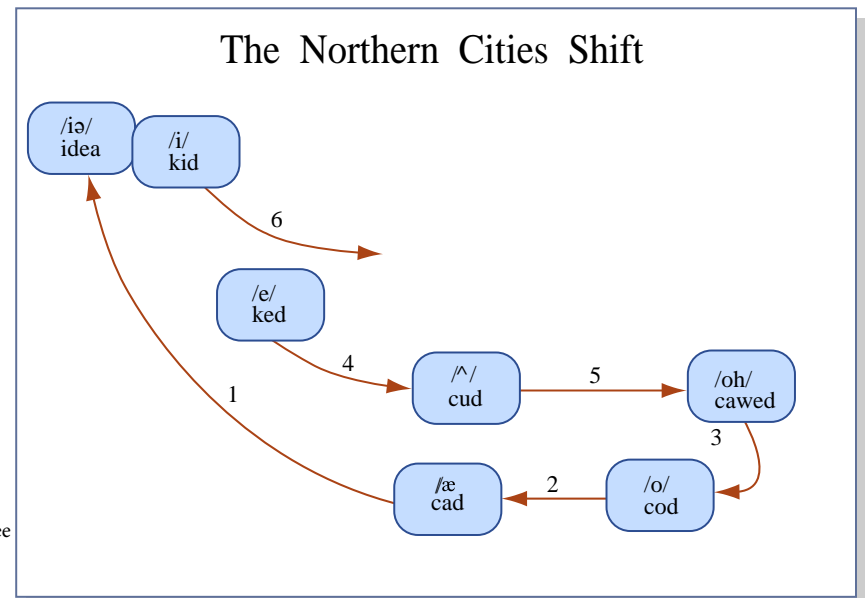
Figure by MIT OpenCourseWare.

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The North

- Much of the North and North Central region is also characterized by 'Canadian Raising'

- Usually written: /aɪ/ → ʌɪ / _ [-voice]   ▶

    /aʊ/ → ʌʊ / _ [-voice]   ▶

- LOT/PALM and THOUGHT are merged in the North Central dialect, but not in the North (*cot-caught* merger).

The South

- The South is characterized by another series of vowel shifts,
  - referred to as 'the Southern Shift', but it's not clear to me why all the changes should be regarded as part of a single 'chain'.

Figure 3. The Southern Shift
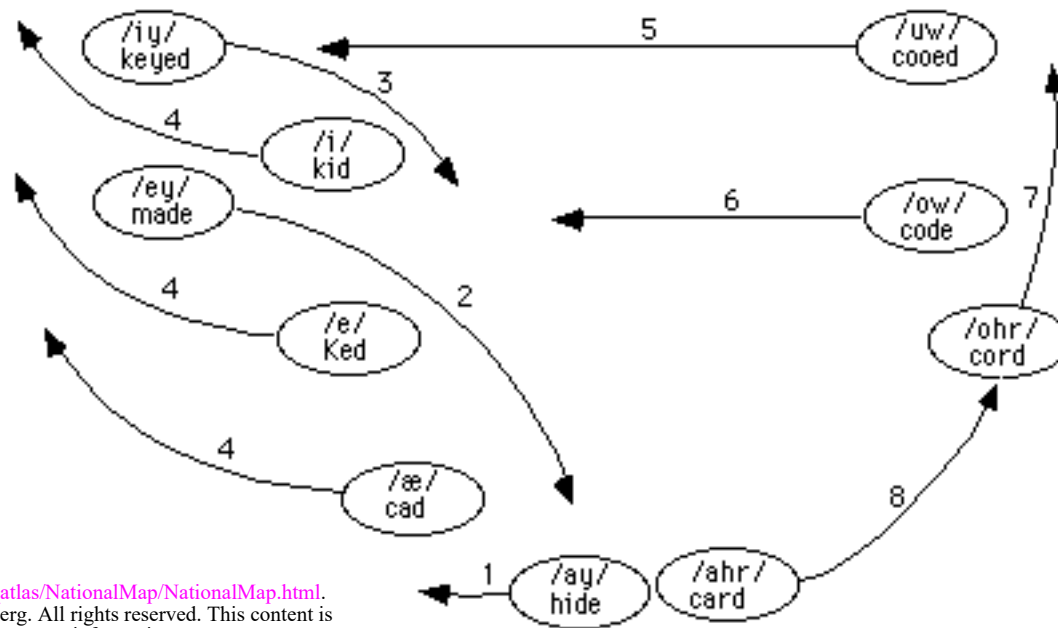
The South

- One of the oldest Southern developments is PRICE monophthongization

  – aɪ > aː (/_[-voice]) Texas ("the longest time" at 1:35)

- GOOSE /u/ fronting Alabama ("goose" at 0:50)

- GOAT /oʊ/ > [əʊ] Alabama ("goat" at 1:04)

- THOUGHT /ɔ/ raising/diphthongization

  Texas ("taught" at 3:55), Alabama ("dog" at 1:05)

- Variably (or contextually) rhotic

  Alabama ("form" at 0:58, "her" at 0:30, "morning" at 0:34)

- Lax front vowels have central offglides in some contexts
  Sometimes 'break' into two vowels separated by a glide
  Texas ("copy of this" at 0:57, "Bass" at 3:11)
  Alabama ("stressed" at 0:36)

The Midlands

- Not very uniform. Primarily characterized by Labov as not participating in Northern Cities or Southern shifts.

- Some Southern features, e.g. fronting of GOAT nucleus [əʊ], but not PRICE monophthongization.

- *cot-caught* merger is spreading in this region.

- This is obviously a very broad characterization
  - many small areas have distinctive accents that do not fit this classification (New York City, Philadelphia, Eastern New England etc).
  - Does not incorporate cultural variation within regions, e.g. African American Vernacular English.
  - Treats most sound changes as context-free.

Eastern Massachusetts

- The Boston accent.
- Non-rhotic

Eastern Massachusetts

- The Boston accent.
- Non-rhotic ▶ ▶ ▶
- Non-rhotic and variably rhotic accents are primarily found in
  E. New England, NYC, coastal plain of the South.
  - But these areas also contain pockets of continuous rhoticity.
- This patterns seems to have resulted because r-loss spread from Southern England along trade routes to major ports of the Eastern seaboard, and then to surrounding areas.
- Non-rhotic accents used to be locally prestigious, but have largely lost their prestige and are in retreat.

Eastern Massachusetts

- Post-vocalic /ɹ/ in many contexts is better thought of as vocalized (de-rhotacized) rather than simply deleted.
- Many historical vowel-r sequences are now diphthongs.
    - floor [ɔa] (=/ɒa/?)   horse
    - hoarse [ʊə]
        - This contrast has been lost in many UK and US accents.
    - NEAR [iə]
    - SQUARE [eə]

Eastern Massachusetts

Some unusual features

- Neutralization of LOT/ɒ/-THOUGHT/ɔ/ to /ɒa/
  - Boston ▶ cot ▶ caught ▶ hot ▶
- PALM remains distinct, but fronted /a/ (*la-law, pa-paw*)
  - car ▶   spa ▶
- Contrast between three front lax vowels before /ɹ/
  - *Mary-merry-marry*

▶ Mary   ɪɛ   eɛ (fairy, hairy vs. Carey)
▶ merry   ɛ   eɛ
▶ marry   æ   ɛæ (carry, Harold vs. marry, Barry)