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ENGL 1200 – Marc Petersen

Language Evolution of North Carolina

The United States is often considered the melting pot of the world. This wonderfully diverse land combines many people from different countries, colorful cultures, and various backgrounds, creating the land that in the words of Woodie Guthrie “was made for you and me.” Even though all of these cultures are melted into one, America certainly is still diverse. The northern, southern, eastern, and western parts of this large country differ from each other, and sub-cultures are present throughout the country. Many parts of the country have some qualities that define it, and most Americans are quick to use these stereotypes. “Out West” people think of cowboys and ranches. If someone mentions, “up North” or “Damn Yankees,” he or she could be referring to the bad drivers of the big cities, or the rude people who are never wrong. When one mentions the South, many different things could come to mind; however, the one that resounds over all the rest, is the slow, southern drawl.

Many stereotypes are present throughout the United States regarding the presence of the southern drawl. Raven I. McDavid Jr., a renowned linguist, gives two specific stereotypes in his book *Varieties of American English* to show how misunderstood origins of dialects are. The first stereotype is that the classic “drawl” is a result of the southern heat (McDavid 52). Another is that the nasal sound, sometimes heard in the South, exists because of alternating rain and heat (McDavid 52). These stereotypes may sound ridiculous, but they do exist. Another commonly used stereotype is the idea that the slowness of speech in the South is directly linked to poor education (Dillard 98). Southerners are often thought to be behind the times, uneducated farmers. While this might have been true at some point in history, it certainly is not a cause of

the southern drawl.

So what is the real reason people living below the Mason Dixon line talk more slowly and with a drawl. This overlying reason can be applied to all accents. The cause of different sounding speech is the background of, and patterns of settlers the group in question has descended from. Humans learn to speak as children by mimicking what they hear around them. They tend to sound like their parents and others they come into contact with often. Therefore, language is passed from generation to generation, changing slightly along the way. Groups of people who come in contact with each other most tend to sound, speak, and talk in the same way. These groups form communities, towns, and regions, and together their speech combines and forms a regional dialect.

The regional dialect in question is what linguists have come to call Southern American English (Algeo 6). This dialect includes all the areas south of the Mason-Dixon Line (the border of Pennsylvania and Virginia) to the northern part of Florida, and from the East Coast to the middle of Texas. It includes parts of fifteen different states. Most likely the biggest misunderstanding about Southern American English is that it all sounds the same (McDavid 52). Even though these areas have similar linguistic characteristics, they most assuredly do not sound the same. Southerners are generally proud of the state or community they live in, and are quick to point out its differences from other southern areas. It would be impossible to discover the reason for Southern American English simply because of the many varieties within that regional dialect. Therefore, one needs to focus on a particular area of the South to find its roots. This paper will give a brief over-view of different dialects present in North Carolina.

To discover the origins of a dialect, one must go back to the very beginning of speech in that area, and look at every different group that has affected it through history. Many

automatically think of the European countries that affect our language, but by doing that, one overlooks the groups of people who were residing in eastern North Carolina long before Europeans arrived; American Indians. The mixture of European settlers and American Indians created a patchwork of different languages throughout North Carolina, including several Indian languages, Spanish, English, French, and several others.

One example of Spaniards trying to settle North Carolina occurred in 1546. Explorer Juan Pardo and his chaplain, Father Sebastian Montero built a mission near Wateree Lake (Rudes 39). This first introduction of Spanish to North Carolina, however, only lasted a year before the Indians drove the Spaniards out because of hostile treatment (Rudes 39). The next attempt at colonization brought English to North Carolina for the first time. In 1587, Sir Walter Raleigh, an English explorer wanted to establish a colony on Roanoke Island (Wisser). He sent John White and 150 other English settlers to the island (Wisser). First everything went fine. Unfortunately, when White left the colony to bring more supplies from England he was detained due to the Spanish Armada (Wisser). He could not return until 1590, and when he did, he found nothing left of the colony (Wisser). The colony received the name “The Lost Colony” for this reason. The Lost Colony was the last attempt at settling North Carolina for the next sixty years (Rudes 40). Although considered failed attempts at colonizing, these short-lived colonies did have an effect on the speech of the region. Different explorers gave names to things in the area, such as rivers and lakes that are still used today. The previous explorers might have felt they failed, but it is now clear they did have a lasting impact on the area.

Knowledge of the North Carolina Indian languages mostly comes from explorations by John Lawson, an English explorer. He explored North Carolina in 1700, and kept an extensive and well-detailed journal of his travels (Historic Bath). These records show that Indians from

three different families were present in North Carolina in the Eighteenth Century. Three different tribes of Algonquian Indians inhabited the land around the Pamlico and Albemarle Sound. Three different Indian tribes from the Iroquoian Family lived in the mountains and plains between the Neuse River and Roanoke River. Lastly, the south of the state, the piedmont and coastal plains south of the Neuse River were home to eight different tribes of the Catawba Family. Although tribes within Indian Families were similar, each of these tribes spoke slightly different languages. Tribes belonging to the Siouan Family of Indians, although not native to North Carolina, moved from southern Virginia into North Carolina when Virginia was being settled. John Lawson also documented two other Indian languages, not belonging to a particular Indian family; they were Natchez and Yuchi. These were the first languages spoken in North Carolina. Seeing the diversity in the languages originally spoken foreshadows language and dialect diversity throughout the rest of North Carolina's history. These first languages of the South were the very basis of what the dialects heard today throughout eastern North Carolina. Any movement of peoples to this area later kept adding other characteristics to the language. (Rudes 38, 39)

After Jamestown, Virginia was settled, in 1642, some of those colonists spread out and moved southward into North Carolina, especially the area around the Albemarle Sound (Rudes 40). The successful colonists eventually started spreading even more, and soon small colonies dotted the landscape of North Carolina. They were the first settlers to last in North Carolina, and their colonies are still surviving today.

At this point in North Carolina history, different variations of English, Spanish, and twenty different Indian languages were spoken. However, within a short amount of time, English would become the dominating language of North Carolina. European settlers began

pushing Indians off their land. The Tuscarora War, in 1711, and the Yamassee War, in 1715, together killed many Indians (Rudes 41) who had resided in North Carolina. The rest were then pushed to several different reservations in the west of the state (Rudes 41). The twenty different Indian languages soon became only two different dialects of the Catawba Indians (Rudes 42). There were other events that drastically reduced that number of Indians in North Carolina. In 1803, the Tuscaroras, a member of the Iroquoian Family, were forced to move to a specifically Tuscarora reservation in New York State (Rudes 43). The famous “Trail of Tears” was the forced removal of Cherokee Indians throughout the South, North Carolina included, to Oklahoma (Rudes 43). This drastic reduction of people speaking other languages all occurred before the Twentieth Century. By that point, the English Language dominated North Carolina.

Although English was the main language during this time, many things did affect the way it was spoken. Arguably the largest effect on English spoken in North Carolina was the introduction of African slaves. Dutch slave traders brought Africans to America in 1619. Approximately 400,000 slaves were brought to America before slave trade was abolished in 1807. Slaves mostly affected the language in the South because most of the population was there due to the plantation economy. These slaves were brought from many different areas and different language groups. Their attempts at communicating with each other, and their owners, created a unique form of English. This variety of English is today known as African-American Vernacular English. (Algeo 11)

Slaves, in general, affected language; however, the slaves acting as house servants and nannies had the greatest effect. These slaves were in constant contact with the whites in the house, as opposed to those who were always in the fields. Also, these slaves mostly took care of the young white children of the house. Children are the quickest to learn new things and copy

speech patterns. Then they carry those characteristics through their adulthood and pass it on to their children. Black children would play with the white children and pass on their speech patterns to their playmates. (Algeo 11)

Slaves had a larger effect on the white's vocabulary than their pronunciation (Algeo 12). One of the first linguists to study Southern American English, Henry C. Knight, noticed, "Children learn from the slaves some odd phrases" (Dillard 96). Knight suggests that this is where the stereotypical Southern "ya'll" originates (Dillard 96). Slaves were brought to America from places other than Africa. Some were brought from Jamaica, where one linguist, J.L. Dillard, in his article "The Development of Southern," suggests the southern drawl originated (Dillard 98). He says that this characteristic has been identified there. Dillard cites one woman who visited Jamaica during the capturing of slaves. She said of a native Jamaican, "...says little, and draws out that little" (Dillard 98).

A wave of English speaking immigrants came to the American south between 1717 and 1775. These immigrants were made up of people from parts of the United Kingdom, other than England. Many were from Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales (Algeo 10). Some settled in North Carolina, while others migrated from Pennsylvania around 1730. These immigrants took the Great Wagon Road, which travels along the Appalachian Mountains, south out of Pennsylvania. They settled all along the Great Wagon Road, which explains a similarity in different states throughout the Appalachian Mountain region. (The North Carolina Language and Life Project)

As well as using The Great Wagon Road as a means of travel south, many followed the coast to North Carolina. There was a group of Scottish and Irish that settled in the Outer Banks of North Carolina during the same time period. Their accent is usually referred to as Brogue,

which means speaking English with a Gaelic accent. The Outer Banks maintains a somewhat different accent, simply because of its isolation from the mainland. However, there is some similarity to the accent of the Appalachian Mountain region, because of the similarity in migration by the Scottish. (The North Carolina Language and Life Project)

During this time of migration, words traveled as well, at different places, they sometimes change from their original meanings. However, according to linguist J.L. Dillard, several examples of words used in the South, that have retained their original Gaelic meaning, whereas other areas have changed the original meaning (Dillard 94). This shows the strong connection with Gaelic that these two regions of North Carolina maintains.

America, now its own nation, continued to grow in population. By the 1830s, America was in the midst of the Industrialization age. There was a great rush of people, Americans and immigrants, towards the cities hoping to finding jobs in factories. Because North Carolina was generally an agricultural state, it did not see the migration that most of the northern cities did (Rudes 43). In fact, hundreds of thousands of African Americans and poor whites moved from the south to more cities in hopes of finding jobs there (McDavid 71). This move was known as the Great Migration. Blair Rudes, in his essay, “Multilingualism in the South: A Carolinas Case Study,” suggested that the “linguistic history of the Carolinas from 1750 to 1950 was on in which the diversity of languages was exchanged for a diversity of English vernaculars” (44).

With the economic growth and prosperity of America after World War Two, even more people wanted to make a living in the new superpower country. The country saw an increase in immigrants from many areas of the world, especially Asia. Also, many Mexicans moving to North Carolina drastically changed the linguistics of this state. North Carolina changed from being a mainly English speaking state in 1950, to having a large population of non-English

speakers by 1990. A huge increase in students with limited English proficiency occurred in public schools. This only continued to grow. According to the National Clearinghouse on English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs, North Carolina received a 908.6 percent increase in children going to public schools with limited English proficiency. Seventy-two percent of these students claimed Spanish as their first language. Other students first languages were Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Hindi, Hmong, Japanese, Cambodian, Korean, Russian, and Vietnamese. These statistics show the complete change in linguistics by the year 2000. According to North Carolina linguist, Blair A. Rudes, “the Carolinas are well on their way to reclaiming their status as among the most linguistically diverse regions in North America.” (44 - 46)

Language can also be affected by things other than the movement of people from place to place. One important example is technology. In the Twenty-First Century, travel and communication are easier and more available than ever. Some might wonder if these things will prove to destroy the existence of dialects all together. Many of the reasons dialects are present, such as isolation, have diminished drastically. People in North Carolina can now easily travel to different parts of the country for college, vacation, and business, and they do. More than ever, people come in contact with different dialects. As John Algeo suggests in “The Origins of Southern American English,” languages and dialects, are not things. They are more like concepts and are affected by all who use language (Algeo 6). Every person, every change affects dialects; they are never stagnant. The slightest changes affect the dialect of North Carolinians, and people in general. With the increase in communication between different dialects and languages, it will be interesting to see how the dialects of North Carolina continue to change.

The evolution of language in North Carolina, as with any regional dialect, is not an easy

thing to explain. The question “Where did the Southern dialect come from?” may seem simple, but it will never have a simple answer. In fact, the answer gets more complicated every day. So many groups of people and historical events have helped it become the drawl that can be heard there today, making it impossible to fully answer the question. From the very first settlement to today, the language of North Carolina, the South, and the world, has continued to change and will forever continue to change.

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