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## "Simply Phonetics": Issues of Accent and Dialect in Nineteenth Century England and Twentieth Century United States

Julie Lollar

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"Simply Phonetics"  
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**Issues of Accent and Dialect in Nineteenth Century England and  
Twentieth Century United States**

Julie Lollar  
Honors Project  
April 1999

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Approval

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# "Simply Phonetics"

**Issues of Accent and Dialect in Nineteenth Century England and  
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## **“Simply Phonetics”: Issues of Accent and Dialect in Nineteenth Century England and Twentieth Century United States**

“A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere—no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespear (sic) and Milton and The Bible; and don’t sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus said Professor Higgins to Eliza Doolittle in George Bernard Shaw’s classic 1913 play *Pygmalion*. This passage reflects a common attitude of the British upper and middle classes in the nineteenth century, and an attitude that crossed the Atlantic to become firmly rooted in American society. As professor Higgins made painfully clear, non-standard speech patterns were (and still are) not acceptable in “polite society.” What are the origins of this attitude? How did the perceptions of language in the preceding centuries in Great Britain affect the methods and manifestations of this attitude and the resulting obsession with language-correctness? The obsession with the purity of the English language began in fifteenth century England and has thrived right up to the present. In Victorian Britain the focus of accent elimination was based on issues of class with sub-issues of geography and ethnicity. In twentieth century United States this has reversed—the issue is primarily based on geography with sub-issues of class and ethnicity. These particular demarcations in each society have led to prejudice and social discrimination based on accent. This study will focus on the causes of accent discrimination, the manifestations of this phenomenon, the effects of such an obsession, and the reasons for the difference in criteria in the United States and Great Britain.

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<sup>1</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion* (London and New York: Penguin, 1975), 11.

A basic understanding of the dynamics of linguistic prejudice is important to the understanding of how and why the manifestations of linguistic prejudice differed in Great Britain and the United States. To understand the method by which a language group is discriminated against, one can use Rosina Lippi-Green's model of language subordination. This model applies to both the British and the American form of linguistic prejudice. There are eight steps in this process:

1. Language is mystified.
2. Authority is claimed.
3. Misinformation is generated ("Your usage is incorrect, mine is correct").
4. Non-mainstream language is trivialized.
5. Conformers are held up as positive examples.
6. Explicit promises are made to conformers ("You will be successful").
7. Threats are made to non-conformers ("You will not be hired").
8. Non-conformers are marginalized.<sup>2</sup>

With this information in mind, a brief look at the history of British concern over language is helpful in understanding nineteenth century attitudes and the way these attitudes culminated in language subordination according to Lippi-Green's model. From roughly 1500 to 1800, the British, like most other Europeans, were concerned with the purity of the national language. Italy and France led the way in establishing academies to regulate the growth (or decay) of their respective national language. Italy established its academy in 1582 and France in 1635. Spain and Sweden formed similar academies in the early eighteenth century. England was not destined for such an academy, despite a push

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<sup>2</sup> Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* (London and New York: Rutledge Press, 1997), 68.

for it from the likes of Jonathan Swift. In 1755 Samuel Johnson published his *Dictionary of the English Language*, and in 1762 Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* appeared. These publications became widely popular and checked the growth of the "need" for a language-regulating Academy. Lowth's book extolled Latin grammar as the source of all things good in language, a perception that had lasted from the Middle Ages. In 1761, Joseph Priestly published his *Rudiments of English Grammar*, in which he extolled the dynamic nature of language and voiced his opinion on the uselessness of Latin rules in the English language. His conception of the language might have taken hold if not for Lowth's publication the following year. England thus became firmly rooted in the idea that language is to remain pure and very Latinized.<sup>3</sup> The British in this period were not concerned over how anyone lower than the intellectual class spoke the language. Their concerns were mostly over written language and the codification of a national language that would insure the economic, cultural and political unity of England. A dynamic language, many felt, would undermine all of that. This view of language purity began to change in the nineteenth century. The focus shifted to spoken English and became primarily a class issue. Peter Trudgill, a leading British linguist, states in his book *Bad Language*, "In Britain, accent differences are both regional and social, but it is the social differences that, for the most part, produce judgments about good and bad accents."<sup>4</sup>

Before discussing the origins of the nineteenth century attitude toward language, it is important to examine the manifestations of this attitude. This study will focus primarily on accent, but will also explore some lexical issues. The particular dialect of

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Finegan, *Attitudes Toward English Usage: A History of a War of Words* (New York: Teacher's College Press, Columbia University, 1980), 19-32.

the working class in London is the primary example of “sub-standard speech”. Known as “cockney,” the dialect of lower class Londoners has been represented—both sympathetically and very unfavorably—by writers from the early nineteenth century to the present. Cockney was perhaps most memorably represented by the aforementioned Eliza Doolittle in Shaw’s *Pygmalion*<sup>5</sup>. Cockney is most clearly distinguishable by accent, but also contains other elements of a distinct dialect, such as lexical and grammatical differences from the language from which it derives. In his book *Does Accent Matter? The Pygmalion Factor*, John Honey points out the importance of distinguishing between accent and dialect. Accent deals with only pronunciation, whereas dialect consists of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and idiom.<sup>6</sup> The relationship between language and class was perhaps first identified and the rules codified in 1954 by Professor A.S.C. Ross. He categorized the language into two large sub-groups. The upper-class way of speaking he called U-English and the language of the lower classes he called Non-U-English. Linguists hasten to point out the fallacy of assuming that U-English is inherently more correct than Non-U. The Victorian Britons certainly spoke with lavish description and Latinized grammar, not to mention propriety. All of these careful examples of their gentility did not prove their correctness, however. They merely proved that they were of the upper class. Of course, it is arguable that proving one’s social class was much more important in Victorian England than proving one’s grammatical correctness.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lars Andersson and Peter Trudgill, *Bad Language* (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 129.

<sup>5</sup> The fact that *Pygmalion* was brought to Broadway and film in the 1960s as *My Fair Lady* and holds a spot in the canon of classic musicals reveals the continued importance of the issues of class and language to the British people.

<sup>6</sup> John Honey, *Does Accent Matter? The Pygmalion Factor* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), 2.

<sup>7</sup> K.C. Phillips, *Language and Class in Victorian England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 35-57.



Nineteenth century Britons primarily focused on accent as a point of discrimination. Certainly Professor Higgins emphasizes the phonetic differences between “proper” speech and the speech of the likes of Eliza Doolittle. Lexical and grammatical issues did exist however. Slang was a point of contention for many of the upper class language purists, and grammar was still based on the Latin system. The slang issues hinged on class distinctions. Some slang terms were considered strictly “vulgar” and some were acceptable in polite society but would have been considered tremendously unseemly if used by lower class individuals. “Oxford slang” was considered acceptable as well. Such words as “sapping” for studying hard or “pluck” for failing one’s exams were perfectly acceptable in upper class society but would not have been known to the lower classes.<sup>8</sup> Of course the lower classes had their share of slang terms, which were considered improper for use in high society. Slang terms existed in every level of society, demarcated by class, occupational, and geographical divisions. Some slang terms might slip between one occupation to the next or from one geographical region to the next, but there was little to no slang exchange between classes. Slang managed simultaneously to be deplored for its risqué tendencies and celebrated for its innovative tendencies. This celebration occurred, of course, only when slang was used “innovatively” by the upper classes, and not when it incorporated foreign terms. G.F. Graham, a writer concerned with the language of England, wrote in 1869: “Many so-called fashionable ladies and gentlemen would, probably, be deeply offended to hear such language termed slang; but any words or forms which are not recognized English

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 42-44.

certainly deserve to be so stigmatized.”<sup>9</sup> This is a throwback to the idea of a national standard for the sake of preserving national identity through the purity of language. A group of language purists formed a society to preserve the language, not in an authoritative way like the academies of other countries, but rather by forming “a group or free association. . .of a few men of letters, supported by the scientific alliance of the best linguistic authorities. . .for guiding educational authorities, and for introducing into practice certain slight modifications and advantageous changes.”<sup>10</sup> The formation of the Society for Pure English in 1913 never fully reached its goal. The formation of the society was postponed throughout World War I and by World War II was nearly defunct. Its very existence and its plethora of tract publications belies the British insecurity about the dynamic nature of their language. The tendency to condescend even to “intelligent slang” was an intellectual pursuit not necessarily adhered to by the average upper class speaker. Still, the trappings of language subordination can clearly be seen starting from the top in the intellectual class and trickling down to the upper and middle classes. The very prevalence of slang does suggest, however, an obsession (at all levels of society) with colloquialisms and provincial dialects, despite authoritative attempts to produce a standard English language.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the prevalence of these and other lexical issues in the Victorian Age, the main linguistic signifier of one’s social standing was accent. The many distinguishable elements of accent are too numerous and complicated for the scope of this study.

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<sup>9</sup> G. F. Graham, “A Book about Words, chapter XIII: Slang Words and Americanisms” orig. pub. 1869 159-70 of *Proper English? Readings in Language, History, and Cultural Identity*. ed. Tony Crowley (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1991), 164.

<sup>10</sup> Society for Pure English Charter. Tract I. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913, reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1976, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Richard W. Bailey, *Nineteenth Century English* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 183-85.

However, there are three very important accent issues that became to nineteenth century Britons (and carried over into the twentieth century) the main markers of social class. These three issues are H-dropping, R-dropping, and the long A/short A crisis.

In *The Vulgarities of English Corrected* (1826), one of the many grammar guides of the era, the anonymous author argues that the most common mistake among the nouveau-riche was H-dropping. This habit (or ‘abit, as the case may be) of omitting the -h sound from the beginning of words was strictly a lower class behavior. The continuation of this habit after a socioeconomic improvement only served to show the “inherent” low class status of the speaker.<sup>12</sup> This vulgarity was so prevalent that there was an entire book devoted to it. *Poor Letter H: Its Use and Abuse*, written by another anonymous author became an essential addition to the library of any social climber. It went into its fortieth printing in 1866.<sup>13</sup> This problem was so prevalent that the reverse became a common mistake: many of the paranoid social-climbers began putting H’s where they did not belong. This tendency towards hypercorrection served to give the Upper class more to satirize about the nouveau-riche. Obviously the preoccupation with kicking the nasty habits of the lower classes became nothing short of an obsession. Yet another anonymous author wrote in 1850 that there were only eight words in the English language which could acceptably be pronounced without the initial -h sound: heir, honest, honour, hospital, hostler, hour, humble, and humour.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century only heir, honest, honour, and hour remained “droppable”.<sup>15</sup> The criteria for deciding which words contained an h that could be dropped were not made

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<sup>12</sup>Lynda Mugglestone, *Talking Proper: The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 68.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>14</sup> Phillips, *Language and Class*, 138.

clear. Apparently the issue was one of tradition, not to mention the whim of the upper class. Whatever the reason for the inconsistencies, one's respectability could be guaranteed to drop right along with one's H's.

Another common cockney habit was R-dropping. This occurred in the middle of a word in which the R followed a vowel and directly preceded a consonant. This tendency rendered such words as "farther" and "father" indistinguishable. The sound of a missing R in the middle of a word is common to the American ear as a typical British quirk—and an upper class one at that. However, in the Victorian era this tendency was considered, along with H-dropping, rather vulgar. The habit of R-dropping was utilized in the poetry of the day—Keats's poetry is especially known for his use of aural rhyme (as opposed to visual rhyme). The Victorian critics considered this "cockney verse" and thus not "real" literature.<sup>16</sup> The issue over R-dropping is a particularly interesting one, since the lower class way of speaking eventually won over the upper class. This tendency is very closely related to the long A/short A crisis—another case of the lower class speech pattern eventually becoming the norm.

The American ear will readily identify a speaker as British who says "past" with the same vowel sound as "father" instead of the vowel sound in "cat". To the Victorian ear, however, this was not the "British" way, but rather the "cockney" way. The guidebooks of the day strongly urged social climbers to retain the traditional short A sound in such words. It is ironic that the very long A sound became the Received Pronunciation (RP) by the twentieth century. The standard for which the upper classes

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<sup>15</sup> Mugglestone, *Talking Proper*, 117.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-01.

stroke changed more than the provincial patterns of speech. This too is ironic, since change was seen as the ultimate linguistic evil.<sup>17</sup>

The general attitude of the upper classes seemed to be that whatever the lower classes said and however they said it was wrong. A distinction would have to be made between the classes. It was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish solely on socioeconomic status. The traditional ideas of nobility and wealth were no longer valid and the aristocracy had to seek other methods to emphasize their status and inherent superiority. This paranoia about the status of the upper class and the status of the language as related to the upper class is best illustrated in the charter of the Society for Pure English: “There is indeed occasional discussion, both in the journals and in table talk, concerning the choice and use of special words and the standards of style; but this is mostly conducted by irresponsible persons, who have no knowledge of the history of English, and are even without any definite ideal or right conception of what the essentials of a good language must be.”<sup>18</sup> The upper class finally decided that the mother tongue must be protected from the uneducated lower classes. To understand fully why language was the chosen method of class subordination, one must look to the social, political, and economic climate of the Victorian age.

K.C. Phillips argues in his book *Language and Class in Victorian England* that language was a way to maintain the class barriers in a time of great social change. Language was a way to identify oneself and others—a stable language made for at least the façade of a stable and rigid society with a defined class structure.<sup>19</sup> To describe the Victorian era as a time of great social change is certainly accurate. The Reform Bill of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 90-96.

<sup>18</sup> Society for Pure English Tract 1, 6

1832, by allowing the middle classes to vote and arguably “creating” a working class, created a greater concern over class identity and ways of drawing distinctions between the classes.<sup>20</sup> The rise of social Darwinism also had a role to play in this change. The idea that language was the great separator of man from beast grew to incorporate the idea that there was a “better” language and the users thereof were, therefore, superior.<sup>21</sup> The Industrial Revolution was the impetus for most of this social change. As a direct result of the increase of factory production, England became urbanized, cities became more populated, the rich got richer, and the poor got poorer. The aristocracy and middle classes were merging, to the great discomfort of the aristocrats, and the working class was becoming more visible to the upper classes. The rise of socialism and labor politics gave the upper class a chance to see the lives of the working class for the first time. The spread of democracy also served as a catalyst for the growth of a “sub-standard” language. The working class used the vernacular as a vehicle of resistance to authority.<sup>22</sup> The social change that was occurring so rapidly around nineteenth century Britons created a perceived need for social demarcation using criteria that the modernization of political thought and industrial reality could not change. The upper class turned to their prized possession—their language.

The changes in political and philosophical thought were accompanied by advances in communications and technology. Migration was made easier because of better methods of transportation. This caused a mixing of geographical dialects, which in turn caused apprehension about provincialisms in speech. The growth of communication

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<sup>19</sup> Phillips, *Language and Class*, 1-3

<sup>20</sup> Honey, *Does Accent Matter?*, 25

<sup>21</sup> Mugglestone, *Talking Proper*, 62

<sup>22</sup> Bailey, *Nineteenth Century English*, 14-17.

and early advances in communication technology provided a way for the different aspects of the language to be widely disseminated. In 1876 the telephone enabled long-distance communication and in 1877 the phonograph allowed recorded sound to become commonplace. All of these things made the spread of differences in language much easier, emphasizing the need for a standard ostensibly to unite the people on a national level, and in reality to unite the people on a class level.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the advances in communications also made it possible for the dissemination of a standard English. The Society for Pure English recognized this fact and aimed to take advantage of it. An article written by Robert Bridges in tract number XXI reveals the optimism on the part of the society for the enhancement of a standard:

“The common use of the telephone, and with much greater effect the later invention of broadcasting speech by wireless, have revolutionized the whole problem. It must, we think, encourage a stricter standardization than otherwise would have been possible. . . [T]his points to its making a differentiation of dialects on the scientific basis of their acoustical merits. . . . The slipshod pronunciations. . . against which we have sometimes protested, will have their actual defects opposed.”<sup>24</sup>

This passage reflects the optimism of the society for the dissemination of a standard despite the prevalence of the dissemination of non-standard dialects over the newly invented lines of communication.

The effects of this phenomenon surfaced in many facets of British society. This study will look at two of the major areas greatly affected by the British obsession with the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 16-22.

<sup>24</sup> Society for Pure English, Tract XXI, 11.

language. The literature of the day provides interesting insights into the attitudes of the classes and the preoccupation with the language of the intellectual classes. A close look at the direction of the growth of education in nineteenth century England also reveals much about the results of this strange national obsession.

The Victorian era is considered one of the richest periods in British literature. The environment of rapid social change served as fodder for the authors of the day, and the class demarcations that were inevitably made in so many of their literary works were often made obvious to the reader by the use of language difference. The poorest classes were often represented in literature with monosyllabic speech, being deprived of words derived from the classical languages. Dickens especially uses this technique in his works, representing the lower classes as uneducated simply by reducing their speech to monosyllables, and mispronounced ones at that. The use of “eye dialect”, the practice of spelling words as phonetically pronounced, combined the taboos of mispronunciation and misspelling to emphasize the illiteracy of the speaker. Many of the words commonly used in “eye dialect” represent absolutely no phonetic difference—the fact that it is misspelled conveys the meaning and is translated in the reader’s mind as “bad speech.”<sup>25</sup> In *Great Expectations*, Dickens has Joe, the working class father figure to Pip, quote a poem he has written, the last line of which is, “Remember reader he were that good in his hart”<sup>26</sup> This is a perfect example of eye dialect. “Hart” represents little to no phonetic difference from “heart”, but the fact that a letter is missing influences the reader to assume that the word is mispronounced as well as misspelled. Whether these authors used the dialect differences to reveal their own language prejudice or snidely to poke fun

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<sup>25</sup> Mugglestone, *Talking Proper*, 212-13.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London: Penguin, 1985), 77.



at the upper class for being so concerned over language is left to individual interpretation—individual in the sense that each reader must decide for himself and in the sense that each author’s work must be approached separately. We have already seen an example of George Bernard Shaw’s representation of the “cockney” dialect. Shaw was perhaps the most outspoken literary figure regarding the language itself. However, George Eliot has a few things to say about it in some of her novels. In *Silas Marner* her narrator says the following:

“The Miss Gunns smiled nicely and thought what a pity it was that these rich country people, who could afford to buy such good clothes, should be brought up in utter ignorance and vulgarity. She actually said “mate” for “meat, “’appen” for “perhaps” and “’oss” for “horse”, which to young ladies living in good Lytherly society, who habitually said “’orse” even in domestic privacy, and only said “’appen” on the right occasions was necessarily shocking”<sup>27</sup>

Eliot’s portrayal of the upper class prejudice is rather humorous, for the “cultured” class, though speaking more correctly than the rich country people, are still dropping the h on “horse”. Clearly language provided convenient divisions even within the well-to-do class, and geographical prejudice was certainly alive and well.

In addition to the “high-brow” literary production of the day, there was a plethora of popular literature designed to ease the transition from a low class position to a higher social standing as one’s socioeconomic status improved. Thus began the second wave of grammar books in England. The first wave occurred in the late eighteenth century and

was more focused on written English, such as Lowth's aforementioned publication and the emergence of dictionaries as a means to codify the language. The second wave of grammar guides focused more on speech than writing and produced texts that were more pragmatic and less systematic than their eighteenth century counterparts. This reflected the loss of concern over the purity of language in an abstract sense and a growth of concern over the purity of upper class language.<sup>28</sup> Thomas Sheridan's *Course of Lectures on Elocution* discusses common customs, such as H-dropping as unacceptable. He argues that broad usage does not equal correctness. In fact, the limited usage of "correct" pronunciation validated and emphasized the elitist view of language.<sup>29</sup> There was certainly a market for this type of literature. The social climate was constantly changing, and social mobility was becoming more and more common. These books included more than just language guides, of course. Etiquette manuals thrived, as well as codes of dress and comprehensive guides that included all the necessary rules of conduct for a social climber.<sup>30</sup> Censor, the pseudonym used by yet another anonymous author, writes the following in his etiquette guide:

Don't speak ungrammatically. Study books of grammar and the writings of the best authors. Don't pronounce incorrectly. Listen carefully to the conversation of cultivated people, and consult the dictionaries. Don't mangle your words, or smother them or swallow them. Speak with distinct enunciation. Don't use slang. There is some slang that, according to Thackeray, is gentlemanly slang, and other slang that is

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<sup>27</sup> George Eliot. *Silas Marner* (London: Penguin, 1996), 93.

<sup>28</sup> Phillips, *Language and Class*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Mugglestone, *Talking Proper*, 114.

vulgar. If the difference is not clear, avoid it all together and then you will be safe.<sup>31</sup>

The preoccupation with language correctness led to this huge output of “self-help” literature, which in turn propagated the notion that to be an acceptable part of society one must learn to speak like the upper class. The irony is that in an attempt to make a distinction between the classes, the obsession with language carried over into a “philanthropic” attempt to improve the people—even those of the working class. The guidebooks were in all likelihood not, however, published by members of the elite group, but rather by other social climbers, who saw a money-making opportunity in the exploitation of the English propensity for language subordination. This tendency to educate the public about the correct way to speak quickly filtered into an all-out attempt to teach the correct way to speak to every child as they came through grammar school, which is not a coincidental term for the institution. Aside from literature, education reflected most greatly the results of the obsession with language. In the eighteenth century even the upper gentry thought it normal and proper to speak with a provincial accent. By the late nineteenth century this was not the case. The upper class spoke so as not to betray their locality. It was no longer good enough to be separated by one’s language from the lower classes; now the upper class had to be completely united in its speech to make a solid stand for its own protection against the encroaching new political ideologies. The polite society spoke the “Received pronunciation” or with an “educated

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Carre, *The Crisis of Courtesy: Studies in the Conduct Book In Britain, 1600-1900* (New York: E.J. Brill Leiden, 1994), 190-91.

<sup>31</sup> Censor. *Don't, or Directions for Avoiding Improprieties in Conduct and Common Errors of Speech* Reprint of 1891 addition, American version of English printing. (New York: Algonquin Books, 1984), 37.

accent”, “public school accent”, “Oxford accent”, or just “talking without an accent”.

This notion eventually evolved into the term “BBC English”.<sup>32</sup>

The Education Act of 1870 promised elementary education to all children. This stimulated optimism among the more philanthropic members of the upper class that the new education system would create a totally literate society and would eliminate provincial accents. Provincialisms were not just a lower-class problem. Elite families whose children attended country schools were left with tendencies towards “mispronunciations” in accordance with the particular county or region in which they were educated. This problem helped create the immense popularity of public schools, which became **the** place for upper class males to be educated. Pronunciation training was regarded as the most important advantage of public boarding schools. The prevailing thought among the upper class was that if one could easily master correct pronunciation, he would be able to handle all the upper class duties after graduating and entering society.<sup>33</sup>

The teachers in these boarding schools were highly trained in the art of speaking properly. The belief that students would adopt their master’s way of speaking prevailed during this time. There were groups responsible for monitoring the teachers and their speech habits periodically throughout their careers. Teachers were required to take tests before entering the profession and periodically throughout their careers. There was a great fear of the teacher’s own provincialisms slipping into his speech, and thus into his students’ speech. The teacher was required to teach language correctness not only during the reading exercises, but throughout the entire schooling process. Students were to be

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<sup>32</sup> Mugglestone, *Talking Proper*, 5-6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 258-83.

corrected on their pronunciation during math lessons as well as language lessons. Again, this required constant precision on the part of the teacher—proper speech had to be completely mastered by anyone aspiring to teach in the elite public schools.<sup>34</sup>

The popular method of teaching children to read in the nineteenth century was phonic analysis, despite the fact that the “whole word method” produced faster results. The whole word method taught children to recognize words based on a memorization technique. Phonic analysis approached it much differently. The proponents of phonic analysis claimed that there was much more to oral reading than word recognition. There was some criticism, however, that teachers neglected the issue of student comprehension of the text in their zeal to produce perfect pronunciation.<sup>35</sup> This issue resembles the issue that pervades modern educational theory concerning the best way to teach children to read. While both sides have their advantages and disadvantages, the phonic analysis method certainly prevailed in the nineteenth century and fit the desired result of the curriculum. The obsession with language correctness presupposed a teaching method that would emphasize phonetic precision. The criticisms of the use of this method to the detriment of text-comprehension are certainly valid points. Nineteenth century Britons seemed, indeed, to care more about the outward manifestations of education than they did about the true purpose of learning.

The ultimate goal of public school education, then, seemed to be extirpation and homogenization. The teachers were to extirpate all traces of geographical markers in their students’ speech, as well as any anomalies that would not be conducive to the path of an upper class male. The ultimate result in theory, then, was complete

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 297-305.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 304-06.

homogenization. Theoretically all the students that matriculated in these public schools would speak with the exact same accent and use the exact same words to express themselves. Of course, this was only theoretically. The ultimate goal of homogenization was a futile dream. Although the education system did produce a more standardized English-speaking upper class, the pervasion of provincialisms did not go away.<sup>36</sup> All the teaching in the world will not undo the quirks of accent learned in one's early years. The dream of a nation of "U-speakers" was doomed to failure.

The many facets of the British fascination with the language come together to create a fascinating picture of Victorian society. The use of language to build class barriers and the exploitation of these barriers by enterprising social climbers willing to sell their secrets of linguistic success to anyone wanting such information reveal the conflict between the old system of class rigidity and the modern system allowing for at least some social mobility. The issue of language as a class marker became more complicated when the eradication of provincialisms became the goal of the upper class. Not only did they have to be separate from the lower classes in speech patterns, they also had to be united in a standard upper class speech. This reveals the unstable position in which the upper class found themselves. The dynamic nature of the standard upon which the upper class settled reveals the ultimate irony of the situation. Change was considered the root of all linguistic evil, but not if change meant a further separation from the lower class. The upper class intellectuals would fight for linguistic stability only insofar as it would not harm the social barriers. Once their position meant an encroachment of the lower class speech patterns on the upper class speech patterns, change suddenly looked less than evil. The British obsession with language is inextricably connected to its

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 308-13.

obsession with class. Even the geographical prejudices ultimately led to class issues. The linguistic prejudice of Victorian England sprang from the paranoia of the upper class about the intrusion of the lower classes on polite society. The lower classes had to be marginalized and made to look unrespectable in this age when respectability was everything, and language was a primary marker of one's respectable status.

The shift of criteria for linguistic prejudice from class to geography in the journey across the Atlantic is an interesting insight into the nature of the differences in England and the United States. The primary focus of linguistic prejudice in the United States is a geographical one, particularly involving the dialects of the Southern states. This is not to say, however, that there are no class-based issues. Even within the Southern states there are sub-issues of class-based linguistic prejudice, and this is of course not limited to the South. In each geographical region there are class demarcations that involve linguistic differences. There are also ethnic issues, such as the recent debate over the validity of Ebonics as a dialect. All of these dialects are deviations from "Standard American English" (SAE), a term which has incurred much controversy in this age of multiculturalism. This study will focus on linguistic prejudice against the dialects of the South, including class issues that are hidden within the overarching issue of geographical prejudice.

Where does the Southern accent fit into the discussion of SAE? This is a question not easily answered. Jane Appleby, a linguist from the University of Alabama, argues that Southerners who choose not to reduce or destroy their accents experience prejudice and snobbery from their educated colleagues. These colleagues seem to think, she argues, that if one is educated, he can and will destroy his Southern accent and become a

SAE speaker.<sup>37</sup> This debate is not a new one. In 1960, George Krapp wrote, “The discussion of dialect always raises complicated questions of theoretical definition. In the common understanding of the term, a dialect is an irregular type of speech . . . condemned by comparison with what is assumed to be a normal and approved set of speech habits.”<sup>38</sup> Krapp’s definition of dialect reflects a culture that strove for uniformity--a standard and **correct** speech. The society of the 1960s (and 1990s?) rejected regional variety as an unnecessary and undesirable deviance from the national norm.

There are many myths surrounding the formation of Southern dialect, including racial, physiological and environmental forces as catalysts for accent formation. These arguments do not allow for social, cultural, and regional forces in the shaping of dialect development. The claim that the excessive heat and humidity in the Southern United States led to the nasal “Southern drawl” is an example of this flawed logic.<sup>39</sup> The true roots of Southern American English lie in British English and early settlement patterns.

Cleanth Brooks, a noted literary scholar, points out that Southern English retains many of the characteristics of British English. He compares Appalachian speech with Elizabethan speech, a comparison now commonly accepted among linguists. Brooks argues that the regional dialects in the United States can be in large part attributed to the settlement patterns in early colonial history. Each dialect region in the United States contains comparable speech patterns as the region in Europe from which the majority of the settlers came. Brooks’s comparison of the speech patterns of Thomas Hardy’s Sussex

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<sup>37</sup> Jane Appleby, “Is Southern Good English,” in *Papers in Language Variation: SAMLA-ADS Collection*, ed. David L. Shores and Carol B. Hines (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 225-27.

<sup>38</sup> George Philip Krapp, *The English Language in America Volume I* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1960), 225.



characters with those of the Southern folk hero Uncle Remus aptly illustrates the congruency between older British English and Southern American English.<sup>40</sup> In many cases the barriers of migration also provided the dialect boundaries, such as in the case of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia, delineating the Piedmont dialect region. In addition to this, the social distinctions between the planter class and the peasant classes evidenced itself through dialect differences, producing “aristocratic” and “redneck” varieties of Southern dialect. Industrialization, urbanization, and education also played a large role in dialect development and differentiation. Urban areas became more socially stratified, and language patterns varied by class. The less educated working class tended to retain their native dialect whereas the more educated, higher classes migrated more to various other regions of the country and obtained a more non-regionally defined “standard” speech pattern.<sup>41</sup>

Given these very “legitimate” cultural roots, why has the Southern way of speaking met with such discrimination? Lippi-Green offers some answers to this. She argues that many Northerners view the “Deep South” as an undesirable place to live. They base this view entirely on preconceived notions and not on any real knowledge of the region. She points out the “eye dialect” used in many non-Southern representations of the Southern speech. This implies that Northerners have no accent and are thus educated. Southerners, conversely, speak a corrupt version of English and are thus uneducated.<sup>42</sup> William C. Greet notes that writers commonly portray Southerners saying “wuzn’t”, “sez”, “izn’t”, and “frum” despite the fact that these words are commonly said

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<sup>39</sup> Raven I. McDavid, Jr., *Varieties of American English* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), 51-53.

<sup>40</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *The Language of the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 9-15.

<sup>41</sup> McDavid, *Varieties of American English*, 67-74.

<sup>42</sup> Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 205-07.

that way in almost every region of the United States. This method is used simply to portray the South as uneducated.<sup>43</sup>

The notion of the South as largely uneducated is a long-standing tradition. The use of stereotypes to marginalize the South has been and is still very common. Stereotyping occurred on the popular level as well as the intellectual, academic level, producing a negative perception of the South and its inhabitants which cut across lines of education and socioeconomic status. Wilbur J. Cash is a prime example of the role of scholars in propagating the myth of the ignorant South. Cash's *The Mind of the South*, published in 1941, reveals the contempt many intellectuals (even those originating from the South, such as Cash) felt towards the traditions and heritage of the South. Cash says the following:

“Whether he was a Virginian or a nouveau, he did not (typically speaking) think; he felt; and discharging his feelings immediately, he developed no need or desire for intellectual culture in its own right.”<sup>44</sup>

James C. Cobb argues in his article “Does Mind no Longer Matter? The South, the Nation, and *The Mind of the South*” that for over a quarter of a century Cash's ideas about the fundamental nature of the South and its inhabitants held almost absolute sway among the academic community. No work on the South was considered complete without Cash's book as a source. This has finally changed, Cobb argues. In fact, the

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<sup>43</sup> William Cabell Greet, “Southern Speech,” *Culture in the South*, ed. William Terry Couch (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 594-95.

<sup>44</sup> Wilbur J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Knopf, 1941; reprint, 1968), 99 (page references to reprint edition).

influence has dwindled to an almost negligible amount—southern scholars do not regard Cash's book as a sound look at the South.<sup>45</sup> The fact that Cash's ideas were so pervading for so long suggests that the academic community played a large role in the dissemination of the myth of the ignorant South and thus the prejudice against the way southerners spoke. Cash provided a distinct division between Southern thought and Northern thought. He says, "We need to pause to remember that when we say Yankee thought and the Yankee mind we are in effect saying modern thought and the modern mind."<sup>46</sup> Cash states what quickly became the prevailing thought among scholars--if it was not already the prevailing thought—that the North held all things modern and progressive and the South held all things traditional and backward.

The popular perception of Southern dialect is every bit as important as the scholarly and linguistic perception. Speakers are not hated or scorned for their accent, but rather their accent is hated because of a deeper prejudice. The sociological ramifications of these popular perceptions are perhaps more important than the analysis of dialect by a linguist.<sup>47</sup> The reasons for these negative popular perceptions have much to do with the regional conflict between the North and South that existed since long before the Civil War. The South before the Civil War was perceived by the North in terms of its agrarian culture, slavery, religious fundamentalism, and a stubborn resistance to federal control over the states. The outbreak of the Civil War, the eventual abolition of slavery and the fiasco of Reconstruction contributed to North-South tensions. The North

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<sup>45</sup> Cobb, James C. "Does Mind No Longer Matter? The South, The Nation, and *The Mind of the South, 1941-91*" *Journal of Southern History* LVII:4, (Nov 1991): 681-718.

<sup>46</sup> Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 137.

<sup>47</sup> Dennis R. Preston, "Where the Worst English is Spoken" 297-358 In *Focus on the USA, Varieties of English Around the World Series*, G 16. ed., Edgar Schneider. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Co, 1996, 298-300; Kenneth Wilson. *Van Winkle's Return: Change in American English, 1966-86*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1987, 75-76

perceived the South as the stubborn step-child, and the South perceived the North as the wealthy oppressor. Of course, these are terms of gross generalization, but to a large extent they held true and defined the way the North and South would interact politically, economically, and socially.<sup>48</sup>

The tensions created in the early years of the Republic carried over into the twentieth century. In the 1920s the nation saw the south as the major problem in United States economics and politics. The nation pointed to the South as the region of ignorance and violence. The Scopes Trial created major press attention that elucidated the southern propensity to reject “factual” information in favor of traditional folk myths and strict adherence to Biblical tradition. In the booming twentieth century this was unacceptable. H.L. Mencken regarded the South as an absolute desert in terms of culture.<sup>49</sup> The stage was set for Northern disdain for the southern way of life, symbolized by the way that southerners spoke. The Civil Rights movement in the mid twentieth century and the Southern resistance to integration only exacerbated the negative image of the South. The North was able to ignore its own prejudices and focus on the evils of the area below the Mason Dixon line. The accents of the leaders of the fight against civil rights for African Americans became to many Americans the signifier of the attitude of hatred and violence, and thus the southern accent was stigmatized further as a thing to be marginalized if not completely eradicated.

The South contains twenty-five percent of the United States population and is full of linguistic variety. There are no less than thirty different sub-varieties of Southern

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<sup>48</sup> Wilson, *Van Winkle's Return*, 76; A. B. Moore, “One Hundred Years of Reconstruction of the South.” *Journal of Southern History*. IX:2, (May 1943), 153-80.

<sup>49</sup> Numan V. Bartley, “Social Change and Sectional Identity” *Journal of Southern History*. LXI:1, (Feb 1995), 3-16.

speech, more than anywhere else in North America, with the possible exception of Newfoundland.<sup>50</sup> The concept of a Southerner, however, is a monolithic fictional and highly stereotyped one, which is usually couched in very negative terms. The diversity of the South is lost in the traditional stereotype. The intelligence of the stereotypical Southerner (such as Andy Griffith and the Beverly Hillbillies) is usually a “native” wisdom akin to a propensity to trickery rather than acquired knowledge. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature reveals the characteristics of stereotyping the Southerner. Works by William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Edith Kelley, Frederick Greene, and many others include descriptions of Southerners who are desperately in need of an education. This depiction became a fundamental element in novels of the South. Shields McIlwaine enumerates several characteristics of these novels depicting Southerners: a full representation of sordid characteristics, an exploration of the “stupidity” of the Southern mind, and a tragic concept of the “poor white.”<sup>51</sup> These characteristics became the defining concept of a Southerner; thus Southern speech became increasingly associated with ignorance and low socioeconomic status, neither of which are desirable in the ideology of the “American way.”

A 1945 article in the scholarly journal *American Speech* reveals the same stereotype that can be seen in the literature of the past century. Charles Hogan relates his opinion of Texan speech by condensing all the possible characteristics of a Texan into one stereotyped image of an ignorant person who does not “correctly” use the English language. He says, “‘After all,’ a Texan will drawl in his amiable, self-satisfied way, ‘what you Yankees don’t realize is that Texas is the only state that went into the Union

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<sup>50</sup> McDavid, *Varieties of American English*, 51-52.

by treaty. We Kin SE-cede any time we take a notion.”<sup>52</sup> The caricature Hogan provides is laughable and provides non-Southerners with an erroneous view of Southern life. The allusion to independence from the United States was in 1945 an extremely stigmatic statement. Combining this with other elements of the caricatured Texan’s behavior produces the stereotypical ignorant, almost anti-American Southerner-- something to marvel at and to marginalize.

The maintenance of this stereotype has in large part been upheld by the information industry. A proponent of SAE, the media has provided the United States with a source of information and a source for the formation of values and societal norms. A 1945 study of New York newspapers revealed that one-year of New York Times publications included 122 items of linguistic interest. These included 18 news items and articles and 97 readers’ letters and editorials. The editorials and readers’ letters primarily addressed issues concerning vocabulary and pronunciation. Many people focused on regionalisms, including Southern pronunciations, used by radio broadcasters, which sounded too uneducated.<sup>53</sup> The media in 1945 was obviously concerned with pushing matters of linguistic interest to the public. Why was this the case and why is it still the case today? Mass media plays a large role in societal norm formation, which Lippi-Green describes as “selling” a national culture. Language used in the media is self-referential propaganda. The media portrays the process of language assimilation as a natural one and as something positive and very desirable.<sup>54</sup> The stereotypes begun in early American history to marginalize Southern speech patterns continued throughout the

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<sup>51</sup> Shields McIlwaine, *The Southern Poor-White: From Lubberland to Tobacco Road* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), 184-219.

<sup>52</sup> Charles H. Hogan, “A Yankee Comments on Texas Speech,” *American Speech* 20:2, 1945: 82.

mid-twentieth century. In 1994 the *Lansing State Journal* ran an article in tribute to Charles Kuralt that said, “For 37 years, Charles Kuralt has shown us what network news can be—calm, thoughtful, perceptive. Beneath that deceptive North Carolina drawl, there’s a crisp intelligence.”<sup>55</sup> The praise for Charles Kuralt’s intelligence comes **in spite of** his Southern accent. The age of multiculturalism has not eradicated the stereotyping of Southerners and their language. Lippi-Green argues that the strength of this stereotype is due in large part to the American fixation with the future. The Southern accent calls up images of contentment with the present, or even nostalgia for the past. This attitude is tantamount to anti-Americanism and thus ignorant.<sup>56</sup>

In Thornton Wilder’s 1952 essay on the American language he says, “I am I because my fellow citizens know me.”<sup>57</sup> Wilder captures the essence of the connection between language and identity. During the 1940s and 50s, conformity was the reigning creed in American life—one was strongly encouraged to adopt the habits of the “Average American. The American people needed a sense of unity. The uniformity of language was one way to ensure unity. Language is an ostensible element of identity; the dialect differences were subtle but constant reminders of the potential the United States had for non-unity. This issue has two sides, however. Many Southerners felt (and still feel) pride in their Southern heritage as well as their American heritage. The presence of a Southern accent gives one an immediate mark of identity. Southern respondents to linguistic studies often claim that the “accentless” Mid-Western speech leaves the

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<sup>53</sup> J.H. Neumann, “American newspaper Interest in English Language Problems,” *American Speech* 20:2, 1945: 99-105.

<sup>54</sup> Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 33-38.

<sup>55</sup> “Daily Guide” *Lansing State Journal*, Apr 3, 1994:1 quoted in Lippi-Green *English with an Accent*, 210.

<sup>56</sup> Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 211-15.

<sup>57</sup> Thornton Wilder “Toward an American Language,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 190:1, 1952: 29-3833.

impression that the speaker has no identity at all.<sup>58</sup> The need for a national identity directly conflicts with the Southern ideal of a Southern-American identity. The sometimes unstable relationship between the distinctly different regions--the North and the South--greatly contributed to the language crisis. The resistance of Southerners to change their language patterns to conform to the "Northern norm" can be construed as simply one more historical Southern defiance. To proponents of language standardization, especially to those of the mid-twentieth century, this "defiance" is simply unacceptable.

Dennis Preston, a linguist from the University of Michigan has conducted several studies of the perceptions of language—both self-perception and the perception of the speech of others. His most recent study yields interesting conclusions about linguistic perception. He interviewed people in several cities spanning the Eastern United States. His main sites were in Alabama, Indiana, and Michigan. He found that the southern respondents found southern speech the most pleasant of all dialects they were exposed to during the study, but they did not think it was the most correct. Michigan respondents, on the other hand, found their own speech both most pleasant and most correct. Indiana respondents found southern speech pleasant but not correct and Michigan speech unpleasant but correct. This study suggests that the preference for local dialects in terms of pleasantness is stronger in areas where there is a high degree of linguistic insecurity. This, in turn suggests that the South has been conditioned to believe the stereotypes and myths of its own linguistic inferiority. The question that Preston does not ask is does this insecurity carry into other realms of intellectual life? The stereotype certainly does.

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<sup>58</sup> Dennis R. Preston, "The South: The Touchstone," *Language Variety in the South Revisited*. ed. Cynthia Bernstein et al (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 309.



Perhaps southerners have been conditioned to feel inferior in cultural and intellectual capacity but superior in hospitality and kindness. This, of course, is pure speculation and may not ever be adequately answered. Preston also found that non-Southern respondents tended to imply if not outright state that southerners spoke bad English and were not as educated as they should be. One respondent's remark, "They just keep saying it," implies that the common theory is that southerners should hear the "correct" way to speak from the audio media and adapt their own speech to this "standard."<sup>59</sup>

The subordination of certain linguistic patterns results in implicit if not explicit discrimination. An employer will most likely not tell a potential employee that the reason he can not hire him is that he has a Southern accent, but the fact that the accent is present can most definitely negatively influence the attitude of the employer towards the potential employee. This can occur despite the fact that the potential employee may be just as qualified and educated as a speaker of SAE. As a result many universities and other organizations across the country have accent reduction classes for speakers with Southern accents, New York accents, foreign accents and others. These programs, distinct from speech pathology classes, promise to teach one SAE and enhance one's professional opportunities. Lippi-Green quotes an advertisement for one such class in an article entitled "Voice of Success Silences Dialect" in the 1994 *Providence Journal*: "As the world shrinks and the information highway extends farther into once remote places, uniformity becomes a business asset. If you talk with distinction, you could go places."<sup>60</sup> The article contradicts itself in this statement. It claims that distinction is the desired result, but it means uniformity. Distinction is exactly what these programs are trying to

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<sup>59</sup> Preston, "Worst English," 315-33.

<sup>60</sup> Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 144-45.

eliminate. Accent reduction classes promote conformity to a pre-approved standard and discourage speech that indicates any identity apart from the “typical American” professional.

Education in the United States has tried to approach the issue of language, though not to the extent that nineteenth century Britain did. In 1966, Hans Kurath wrote about the need for correction of improper speech. He discusses how far a teacher should go to encourage a student to leave behind provincial speech. His solution is to correct a student in this manner: “I know that many people around here say it that way, so it is alright when you talk with them. But when you talk to strangers or want to be a lawyer or doctor some day, you should say it differently. Also, you’ll make a much better impression when you’re looking for a job that pays well.”<sup>61</sup> Kurath explicitly states that regional speech is simply not good enough for someone seeking status in American society. For a “job that pays well,” one better learn to speak the national standard, whatever that may be. Eleven years later, another author discusses various ways to handle the problem of dialect difference. He introduces four methods: Traditional grammarian approach, laissez-faire, nationalism, and multidialectalism. The first bans dialects from the classroom and attempts to homogenize the students. The second allows the students to speak however they choose in hopes that self-segregation will occur and students will be pressured by their peers to learn the standard. The third pushes homogeneity along ethnic and regional lines, and the fourth calls for the study of more than one dialect.<sup>62</sup> Each of these approaches have obvious limitations, which illustrates the complexity of

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<sup>61</sup> Hans Kurath, “Regionalism in American English.” 161-75 In *The English Language in the School Program*. ed. Robert F. Hogan. Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English Press, 1966, 162.

the issue of education in a nation of many dialects, most of which are considered less correct. The issue is still very much alive, as evidenced by the battle over Ebonics and other issues of standardizing the American language. Southern speech may not be under the same severity of attack, but it is certainly seen as the speech of the uneducated.

The subordination of the many Southern dialects of American English follows Lippi-Green's model. Stereotyping the Southerner and caricaturing the language through literature and media mystified the Southern speech patterns. Proponents of SAE claimed the authority of their "standard." The stereotyping and media attention to the dialect differences perpetuated the myth of the inherent ignorance of Southern American English and trivialized it in its pop-culture and political caricatures. Conformers to SAE have been held up as professional, educated, and successful, whereas non-conformers have been marginalized. The possible strides in the reception of Southern speakers include the recent election of two Southern presidents, but the realm of politics somehow deviates from the norm of language subordination. The role of Southern speech in American politics is a topic worthy of its own investigation. The stigma of "speaking Southern" that has existed at least since the early twentieth century is still thriving today. In an age when the variety of American life is celebrated, the choice to speak with pride the language of one's heritage is stigmatized and marginalized. The division lines between Southern American English and Standard American English are still strong and still incur discrimination.

Lippi-Green's model of language subordination aptly describes the process that occurred in both nineteenth century England and twentieth century United States. The

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<sup>62</sup> Paul D. Brandes and Jeutonne Brewa. *Dialect Clash in America: Issues and Answers*. Metucha, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987, 93-163.

prevalence of linguistic discrimination has not changed, but the criteria upon which to base linguistic prejudice has. The emphasis on class in England reveals the paranoia on the part of the upper class and the strong desire to keep England an immobile society. The emphasis on geographical divisions in the United States illustrates that class mobility is not an issue, but rather that being a resident of the “right “ part of the country is very important. The fact that there are still strong tensions between the North and the South, despite the recent strides toward urbanization in the South, is clear from the way northerners and southerners perceive one another’s speech. If one wants to elevate one’s status, a willingness to conform to the standard is a necessity, even if that means denying one’s regional linguistic quirks. These regionalisms in American speech are one of the many things that illustrate the presence of multiculturalism, something we can either learn to celebrate or continue to stigmatize and marginalize.

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