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English in the Southern United States

STUDIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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English in the Southern United States

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The origins of Southern American English

JOHN ALGEO

1 Introduction

The origins of Southern American English can be found on the islands off the shore of the Netherlands and in northern Germany and southern Denmark (where English speakers dwelled before they crossed the channel to invade the British Isles) or, to go back a bit further, on grassy plains somewhere in mid Eurasia (where the Proto-Indo-European-speaking peoples had their Urheimat) and, even before that, perhaps in the Great Rift Valley of East Africa (where *Homo sapiens* may have originated). That is, Southern American English has the same origins as all other dialects of English, all Indo-European languages, and maybe all human languages.

To be sure, such answers to the question "What are the origins of Southern American English?" go deeper into origins than the question normally asks for. But it is important to keep in mind that, when we talk about the "origins" of anything, our talk is always relative to other things and times. To ask about the "origins" of a speechway like Southern presumes that it popped into existence at some point as a departure from another speechway.

But all language is always changing, so every *état de langue* is at every moment a departure from what it used to be. Southern did not depart from "general" American, much less early Modern English or Proto-Germanic or Proto-Indo-European or Proto-Human. Like the galaxies of the cosmos, all languages are flying apart from one another, and there is no center. To compare language to the expanding universe is, however, a metaphor, and we need to be wary of metaphor.

2 Metaphors of origin

Most talk about languages and their history – like talk about everything else – uses metaphor. Much of our discourse is necessarily metaphorical. Metaphor can be enlightening, but it also "darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge" when we forget its limitations. We discuss the history of languages with metaphors that have severe limitations, and the only practical way to deal with those limitations is to be aware of them.

With languages, a pervasive metaphor is reification, by which we treat an abstraction as though it were a physical thing. A language is not a thing; it has no shape, weight, size, or color. A language is a personal abstract system in the mind, brain, tongue, and ears of each user. Or, more accurately, a language is a general abstract system (langue) embracing many such personal abstract systems (paroles) that overlap one another in major ways.

Each personal system is constantly changing throughout the lifetime of its user; and consequently each general system is constantly changing as well. The reality is an ever adapting, fluctuating, fuzzy, messy pattern of behavior more or less shared by a great many persons at any one time, whose history we try to relate as though it were instead a thing with a clear outline and identity, like a pyramid or a canyon.

Southern American English is not a thing or a single entity. Lee Pederson (2001) has analyzed what is here called "Southern" into eighteen subvarieties on four hierarchical levels:

```
Southern
  Coastal
     Atlantic
     Gulf
  Interior
     Piedmont
     Gulf Plains
       eastern
       central
       western
  Delta
     upper
       Arkansas River basin
       Yazoo River basin
       Red River basin
     lower
       Atchafalaya River basin
       Lower Mississippi River basin
South Midland
  highlands
     eastern: Virginia, Kentucky, east Tennessee, Georgia Blue Ridge
     central: middle Tennessee, upper Alabama Cumberlands
     western: Missouri and Arkansas Ozarks
  piney woods
     Georgia and Alabama wire grass
     Florida and Alabama sand hills and pine flats
     Mississippi and Louisiana piney woods
     east Texas pine flats
                                                    (Pederson 2001)
```

Each of these subvarieties (which could be further subdivided right down to the momentary existence of their speakers' idiolects) has its own characteristic features of phonology, vocabulary, and grammar; and each of those characteristics has its own origin and history. When we look at language systems in this way, we catch a glimpse of the Buddhist principle of *anatman*, namely that nothing has a separate, whole identity. Does an abstraction have an origin in the way a thing does?

Another metaphor of language history is that of the "family." We talk of "relatedness," "sister languages," "descent," "parent languages," and so on. Such metaphors not only reify languages, but they also treat them as personal entities with a life span, distinct boundaries separating them, and clearly definable relationships with one another. Languages are not persons that spawn one another, but a system that alters so much over time that we find it useful to define boundaries between its stages and to give distinct names to the stages we have defined.

A closely related metaphor is that of the language tree, which is useful on a gross level but cannot easily diagram some important language connections. For example, languages not only develop out of one another, but also affect one another in various other ways. In a typical language tree diagram, English is shown to be a development of the West Germanic branch of Proto-Germanic. But Latin has been a major influence on English vocabulary, either directly or through French, by both its native Italic word-stock and its borrowings from Greek. Moreover, French and Norse have significantly affected English grammar. And over the course of time, a variety of causes have radically changed the typological structure of English from dominantly inflectional to dominantly isolating. None of that is shown by a tree diagram, which treats each language system as though it were an independent and stabile entity.

But that's not the way a language is. The boundaries, both diachronic and synchronic, between one speechway and another are, to a considerable extent, arbitrary. No Hadrian's Wall divides Southern American English from Midland American English, or early Modern English from late Modern. One speechway flows into another, chronologically, spatially, socially, and in every other way. It is for our convenience and our interest that we create the divisions we draw between speechways.

For geographical, historical, cultural, and other reasons, we recognize a regional dialect of English in America we call "Southern." That dialect has some features of lexis and grammar that, in their sum, are different from the sum of contrasting features in other dialects. It is therefore reasonable to ask about the origins of those features and their sum. And that, in fact, is what we mean when we ask, "What are the origins of Southern American English?" But in answering that question, we need to keep in mind that Southern American English is not a thing with clearly defined boundaries, but is instead a generalized pattern of a large number of personal abstract mental systems and associated behavior that are ill defined and ever changing.

We cannot escape metaphors in talking about language origins. But we can be aware of them, and we can vary them. One variation is to think of the origins of a language as comparable to the origins of a human personality, the product of heredity, environment, and choice.

3 The heredity of Southern American English

The heredity of Southern American English involves neither two parents, as the family metaphor suggests, nor a single ancestor, as the language tree depicts. It includes multiple lines of descent.

3.1 The English core

The first origins of Southern American English are in the initial colonial settlement by British immigrants. The first permanent English-speaking settlement in America was in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, so American English began with Southern. The colony never thrived, partly because its land was marshy and thus unhealthful and partly because its leading settlers were of an English class unaccustomed to the rigors of pioneering, so it was more of a curtain-raiser than a first act. Yet Jamestown is notable as the place where the economically important crop of tobacco was first cultivated, the first African slaves were imported, and the first representative government was established. All of those features were to be characteristic of the American South, and the last one of America as a whole.

The first settlers of the American colonies had a variety of origins (Bailyn 1986a,b). David Hackett Fischer (whose views on cultural continuity have not gone unchallenged) has proposed a colonial settlement of America from Britain in four major waves, of which that occurring in 1642–75 brought immigrants from southern and western England, consisting principally of gentry and their servants. The early settlement of the American South was therefore unlike that of most of the other early colonies, where the immigrants were preponderantly middle or independent working class. The early period of the Virginia settlement coincided with the English Civil War and Puritan Commonwealth, when younger sons, whose traditional careers in the army or clergy were closed to them by the Puritan government of England, flocked to the New World to seek their fortunes. Yet by far the bulk of the early Virginia settlers were indentured servants: rural, male, and illiterate. The "ancestral connection to southern and southwestern England" has accordingly been called "the Cavalier myth of the Old Dominion's origin" (Montgomery 2001: 110).

Fischer (1989: 256-64), citing a variety of studies, attributes practically all Virginia linguistic characteristics to the dialects of the south and west of England. Moreover, because of the gentry's associations with the motherland, a firmer connection was maintained with England than was the case in other colonies, so linguistic influence was also maintained. For example, [r]-dropping in America,

probably introduced from England during the colonial period, is most widespread in the coastal South, where it is typical of the regional speech. Elsewhere in the United States it is confined to smaller areas centered on major port cities (Boston and New York). The rest of the coastal South (the Carolinas and Georgia), having been settled from Virginia or on land at one time associated with the Virginia colony, shares the characteristic.

3.2 The Scots-Irish stratum

But Southern American English is not derived solely from one wave of settlement. Another wave identified by Fischer (1989) lasted longer than any of the others (1717–75) and consisted of more immigrants, especially from northern England, Scotland, and northern Ireland (the Scots-Irish). They came in family groups in search of economic improvement. They came to all the colonies, but settled notably the Appalachian region of the western South. Their immigration was part, albeit the major part, of a more general Celtic cultural migration.

Michael Montgomery, who has spent a decade in pursuing the "transatlantic comparison of English and Scots in Scotland and Ulster on the one hand with English in America (especially in the American South and Appalachia) on the other" (2001: 117), has traced the overall history of the Scots-Irish migration and summarized the scholarly study of it in his chapter in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*. He cites (2001: 89) Stephen Thernstrom (1980) as identifying five British linguistic profiles in addition to English proper: "Lowland Scottish, Highland Scottish, Irish, Scots-Irish (Protestants from Ulster mainly of Lowland Scottish background), and Welsh." The largest and most influential of these groups during the early period, however, were the Scots-Irish, who settled the inland South (Montgomery 2001: 91):

In America the great majority of Scotch-Irish landed in Delaware or Pennsylvania and soon headed to frontier areas, reaching the interior of Virginia in the 1730s and the Carolinas in the 1750s. They and their descendants settled and were culturally dominant in much of the interior or upper south – the Carolinas, Georgia, Tennessee, and Kentucky – within two generations.

Various linguistic features, such as the Southern double modals (*might could*, *might would*; cf. Bernstein in this volume), have been traced to Scots-Irish influence, but the principal domain of that influence was vocabulary (Montgomery 2001: 127):

Comparisons of Appalachian or Upper South vocabulary (as labeled by *DARE*) with Ulster and Scottish works reveal more extensive connections: *airish* "chilly, cool," *back* "to endorse a document, letter," *back-set* "a setback or reversal (in health)," *bad man* "the devil," *barefooted* "undiluted," *beal* "suppurate, fester," *biddable* "obedient, docile," *bonny-clabber* "curdled sour milk," *brickle* "brittle," *cadgy* "lively, aroused," *chancy*

"doubtful, dangerous," contrary "to oppose, vex, anger," creel "to twist, wrench, give way," discomfit "to inconvenience," fireboard "mantel," hippin "diaper," ill "bad-tempered," let on "to pretend," muley "hornless cow," nicker "whinny," poor "scrawny," swan or swanny "to swear," and take up "begin"...One of the more intriguing Ulster contributions is cracker "white Southerner."

3.3 The African stratum

Although the English origins of Southern American speech can be traced primarily to, first, a coastal population consisting primarily of lower-class indentured servants plus a minority of upper-class (or upwardly aspiring middle-class) persons and, second, an interior Scots-Irish population, the formative influences on Southern American English were not limited to British colonists. Another important factor was the language of the African slave population. Dutch slave traders introduced African slavery to America in 1619, and by the time the trade was abolished in 1807, some 400,000 Africans had been forcibly settled in America. The height of the trade was in the eighteenth century, when slaves were needed to staff the plantation economy of tobacco, rice, and cotton cultivation.

In addition to the field hands, whose services made the southern plantation economy possible, other slaves were house servants, who lived in intimate relationship with their masters, often serving as nurses for the white family's children, and skilled craftsmen. It was through the latter two groups that the language of African slaves became an important influence on Southern English.

The African stratum is a contributing factor to the existence of a number of social or ethnic varieties spoken by African Americans within the southern area and elsewhere. Those varieties range from the Gullah Creole spoken on the islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia to various nonstandard varieties of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), as well as varieties of standard American English embellished with features from the nonstandard varieties and spoken by both blacks and whites. Various features from African-American English, including elements of the African stratum, have entered standard English, and are continuing to do so. The scope of the African-American varieties and their characteristics have been surveyed by Salikoko Mufwene (2001a), who has also done much primary research in documenting and analyzing them (cf. also Mufwene's chapter in this volume).

The question of the origins of African-American English is a debated and contentious one, often intertwined with other social and political questions. Two extreme positions are, on the one hand, that African American is a development of the nonstandard regional and social usage of early English settlers with minor contributions from African languages; or, on the other hand, that African American is in origin a separate creole language – an African system into which English words have been inserted – that has imperfectly but increasingly assimilated to the norm of standard English.

It is possible that the disagreement about the origins of African-American English is a product of invalid assumptions about the coherence and consistency of language varieties. Perhaps the reality is a number of different patterns of development, moving in different ways, within the generalization we call "African-American English." If so, the problem is the way we have asked the question. What is clear is that African-American English, whatever its origin, and the African stratum, whatever its role in forming African-American English, have influenced Southern American English and English generally.

African influence is readily apparent in the vocabulary, although precise origins are often difficult to identify. Examples are *gumbo*, *voodoo* (both through Louisiana French), *banjo*, *buckra* "boss" or derogatory for "white man," *cooter* "turtle," *goober* (and its synonyms *pinder* and *goober pea*), and *okra*. There is a temptation to ascribe many other terms to African sources if they are associated especially with the African-American population and possible African etyma can be located for them (such as *boogie-woogie*) and, regrettably, even if they are not so associated and their actual origin has been well-established outside Africa (such as *OK*).

Other terms whose ultimate origins are unknown have also come into general southern and general American use from the African-American community, for example, to bad-mouth and much of the vocabulary of popular music, including jazz, dig, hip, jive, and rap (Cassidy and Hall 2001). There are fewer indications of the general extension of African-American pronunciations or grammatical forms. Thus Ronald Butters (2001: 330) observes, "Though most Americans today are aware of the AAVE [African-American Vernacular English] invariant be and are likely even to use it when imitating AAVE, it has not spread into other varieties of American English."

3.4 The Amerindian and Polynesian strata

When the first English-speaking settlers arrived in America, they found the land already inhabited by the Amerindian population, consisting of many groups diverse in culture and language. It has been estimated that when Europeans first arrived, the land area of the present United States was populated by speakers of 350 to 500 languages, of which some 200 still survive (Romaine 2001: 154–5).

The Amerindian contribution was almost entirely lexical, especially terms for New World fauna, such as *raccoon*; flora, such as *persimmon*; artifacts, such as *moccasin* and *tomahawk*; place names, such as *Shenandoah*; and other cultural referents, such as *pone* (as in *corn pone*), all from Virginia Algonquian languages. Hawaiian has contributed terms like *aloha*, *lei*, *hula*, and *ukulele*.

3.5 Other immigrant strata

Large numbers of settlers came to America also from other countries and linguistic areas. Prominent among them were Chinese, Danes, Dutch, Finns, French,

Germans, Italians, Japanese, Jews, Portuguese, Russians and other Slavs, Scandinavians, Spaniards, and Swiss. Those ethnic groups settled mainly outside the South, and so their influence was for the most part directly on or through other regional dialects.

4 The environment of Southern American English

Robert Frost observed, "The land was ours before we were the land's." A language cannot but be affected by the environment in which it is used. Speakers settle in a place, and then the place affects their speech. Whatever the origins of particular southern features in British dialects or non-English languages, it is clear that a new amalgam grew up in America, of which a formative influence was the new environment – that is, whatever was around the speakers to be spoken of.

American speech generally and southern speech specifically were often commented upon favorably by British visitors to the colonies (as quoted by Boorstin 1958: 274): "The Planters, and even the Native Negroes generally talk good English without Idiom or Tone." The impression of "good English" and uniform accent "without Idiom or Tone" is perhaps due to the fact that the colonists as a whole were of more uniform background than the population of the British Isles, but also that communication among the colonies was relatively abundant. That communication, easier and more frequent than contact with the motherland, created a sense of connectedness and of belonging to each other and to the land.

Not all Britons, however, were equally pleased with what they heard in the colonies. One such, Francis Moore (writing in 1735), observed that "the town of Savannah... stands upon the flat of a hill, the bank of the river (which they in barbarous English call a bluff) is steep and about forty-five foot perpendicular" (cited by Mathews 1931: 13). English rivers generally do not have steep banks, and therefore the English had no need for a term to designate them. The American colonists did have such a need and met it by adapting a nautical adjective meaning "presenting a broad flattened [or] a bold and almost perpendicular front" (OED) to use as a noun. Another such topographical term in the southern Appalachians is bald "a mountain whose summit is bare of forest," also shifted from adjective to noun, to denote a feature of the landscape for which no other term was available.

The adapted uses of bluff and bald illustrate the effect of environment on Southern American English (or for that matter on all American varieties). The colonists had to talk about things they had not encountered in the motherland. For some such things, they borrowed words from other languages, Amerindian or other immigrant languages; for others, they coined new words out of their own native resources, so *bluff* and *bald* changed their parts of speech and meanings.

Words did not have to shift their part of speech to shift their meaning in America. A well-known example of a shift in meaning only is corn, meaning "grain" such as wheat, oats, barley, rye, etc. in Britain, but "Indian corn, maize" in America, where the colonists learned from the Amerindian population to use

the latter as a chief foodstuff. That shift was not specifically southern, but a similar shift in *plantation* is. The original sense of that word was "an act of planting"; its early use in America was "a settlement, colony"; but by the beginning of the eighteenth century it had developed what is today its most usual sense: "An estate or farm, esp. in a tropical or subtropical country, on which cotton, tobacco, sugarcane, coffee, or other crops are cultivated, formerly chiefly by servile labour" (as the *OED* puts it). The growth of the plantation system in the South provided the environment to promote a semantic shift in the term.

The environment about which we talk is constantly changing, so new experiences continually present themselves and call for a linguistic response. An example is the popularity of soft drinks, which have a considerable history, involving some notable contributors. Jan Baptist Helmont (1580–1644), the Belgian "father of biochemistry," identified carbon dioxide as the product of fermenting grape juice and coined the term *gas* for such states of matter as distinct from atmospheric air. In the late seventeenth century, lemonade was being marketed in Paris and the naturally effervescent water of some European springs was sold for its therapeutic value.

Robert Boyle, one of the founders of the Royal Society, in 1685 proposed "the imitation of natural medicinal waters by chymical and other artificial wayes." Nearly a century later, Joseph Priestley, famed for his work with oxygen and English grammar, in 1772 demonstrated a practical way to carbonate water with a pump, and for this, Priestley has been dubbed "the father of the soft drink industry." Shortly thereafter Antoine Lavoisier repeated the demonstration in Paris. By the end of the eighteenth century, artificially carbonated water was being sold in England by an apothecary and in Switzerland by Jacob Schweppe, a jeweler. The initial use of the water was medicinal. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a variety of flavorings were being added to the carbonated water, but it was not until 1886, when Coca-Cola was invented by an Atlanta, Georgia, pharmacist and flavored with extracts from the kola nut that the soft drink industry came into its own.

Terms for the drink have evolved as well. The oldest appears to be *soda water* (1802), followed by *pop* (1812, for the sound produced when a bottle is opened), *soda* in *soda bottle* (1824 by Lord Bryon), *soda pop* (1863 by Walt Whitman), and *soft drink* (1880). It is perhaps noteworthy that the generic term used by *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, tenth edition, in definitions of related words is *soda pop*; that used by the *OED* is variably *soda water* or the descriptive terms "effervescing beverage" and "soft drink." The last has no lexical entry in the *OED*, but is exemplified only in syntactic combinations of the adjective *soft* "of beverages, nonalcoholic" (labeled by the *OED* as "orig. dial. and U.S."). *Soft drink* is, however, the lemma used by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and is perhaps the most widely used generic.

With the advent of Coca-Cola in 1886 (the term is attested from 1887), a new phase in the commercial history of soft drinks began, and one especially connected with the South. The Georgia-originated drink spawned imitators,

notably the North Carolina Pepsi-Cola in 1903. The short form Coke (1909) was followed by *Pepsi* (trademark registration in 1915 claiming use since 1911). The generic use of cola is attested from 1920. But the particularly southern use is of coca-cola (often pronounced [kok'olə]) or coke as a generic for any soft drink, usually though not necessarily a carbonated one. The syncopated pronunciation is attested from 1919 for the trade name, and the generic use of both full and short forms from about 1960 (Cassidy and Hall's DARE s.v. coca-cola).

5 Choice in Southern American English

Sometimes, faced with variety in English use, Americans have chosen a particular option for reasons that are unknown. A general example is American fall versus British autumn. Fall as a season name is attested in English, earliest in the phrase fall of the leaf, from the sixteenth century, but is possibly much older and has become the most usual term for the season in American English. Autumn is a fourteenth-century loanword from Old French and is now the most usual term in Britain, but is largely restricted to formal contexts in America. Why the choice should have gone in different directions on either side of the Atlantic is not clear.

A more specifically southern example is the nonstandard pronoun hit for standard English it. The form with aspiration is, of course, original, going back to the Old English third-person-neuter personal pronoun hit. Forms with and without aspiration are found in various early Germanic languages, but the dominant form in early English was the aspirated hit. In the early thirteenth century, the unaspirated form began to appear, along with a further elided 't, both perhaps due to lack of stress, the tendency being to elide [h] at the beginning of unstressed syllables as well as unstressed vowels. The aspirated hit disappeared from standard use after the early Modern period (the OED's last example of its use is by Queen Elizabeth I), but it survived in nonstandard dialect, as in Southern American English, as Frederic Cassidy and Joan Hall's Dictionary of American Regional English (1985-) shows. Why it did so is unclear, the "colonial lag" hypothesis being a label of dubious appropriateness, not an explanation (Montgomery 2001).

Some individual features in all varieties of American English, including Southern, can be traced to various sources: variable features in earlier standard English, dialectal varieties of English in the British Isles, aboriginal languages in America, other immigrant languages, later borrowings from abroad, and American innovations in response to the environment of the New World. But some features that distinguish Southern American English (or indeed any variety) have no clear motivation or explanation. Why do Americans tend to say fall rather than autumn? Why do some Southerners say hit rather than it? They simply use one of the available options, but why they use that option rather than another is unexplained. It's just the way it is.

The three published volumes of Cassidy and Hall's Dictionary of American Regional English (1985-), covering the vocabulary from A to O (omicron not yet

omega), contain some 4,500 words labeled "Inland South," "South," "South Atlantic," "Southeast," or "South Midland," plus others labeled for individual states and areas like "Appalachians." To answer adequately the question posed by the title of this chapter, we would need to consider at least the history of all those words, as well as those to come in the range of N to Z, with respect to their phonology, morphology, and syntax. It is a daunting task. But the labors of scholars like Michael Montgomery, others cited here, and many others unnamed, make it possible.