



## American English Vocabulary, Dialects, and Idioms

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**ABSTRACT**

This article is depending on how precise one need be, one can say that America has from three to a dozen dialects.

**Keywords:**

**Dialects, homogenize, typewriter, telephones, record players, duplicating machines, diphthongization.**

Early Americans had more sharply differentiated dialects than they do today. The Puritans in New England spoke the English East Anglia dialect, the Quakers in Pennsylvania spoke the English midland dialect, the Scotch-Irish in the Blue Ridge Mountains spoke the Ulster dialect, etc.—and they and their speech patterns were separated by wilderness, bad roads, and lack of communications. Then geographical and social mobility began to homogenize the language, with people from all regions moving to all others, people from all walks of life mixing and mingling. Better roads and wagons, trains, cars, moving vans, high-speed printing presses, the telegraph, the typewriter and teletype, telephones, record players, duplicating machines, radios, movies, and TV mixed and melded American speech into a more and more uniform language. In addition, our dialects were smoothed out by generations of teachers and by two crucial series of elementary school books: the various editions of Noah Webster's The American Spelling Book, "the Blue-Backed Speller" that sold over 80 million copies and from which generations of Americans from

the 1780s to the 1880s learned to spell and pronounce the same words in the same way, and Professor William Holmes McGuffey's six series of Eclectic Readers, which sold over 122 million copies between 1836 and the 1920s, giving generations of Americans a shared vocabulary and literature. Thus American mobility, educational systems, and improved means of transportation and communications have given Americans an increasingly more standardized vocabulary and pronunciation. When we hear America talking today we usually hear only a touch of a regional "accent"; American dialects are fading away. Depending on how precise one need be, one can say that America has from three to a dozen dialects. There are three overall, major ones: the New England, the Southern, and the General American (sometimes erroneously called the Midwest or Western dialect). Here are brief descriptions of three major regional dialects:

New England dialect is spoken from the Connecticut River north and eastward through Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. New England was nor

misnamed: between 1620 and 1640, 200 ships brought 15,000 English colonists to the region, two-thirds of them from East Anglia, the Puritan stronghold. Those colonists from East Anglia, and other parts of southern and southeastern England, gave New England its distinct dialect, first called the New England dialect in 1788. It is still closer to English than any other dialect of American English. Some of its characteristics are:

- pronouncing the a in such words as ask, brass, can't, class, fast, grass, half, last, and path somewhat like the broad a in father, and lengthening the a sound in such words as bar, dark, far, farm, and heart to a sound somewhat between the sound the rest of us pronounce in hat and father (this last a sound is also found in eastern Virginia and elsewhere in the tidewater region). Thus we tease Bostonians for saying "ahnt" (aunt) and "vahz" (vase).
- pronouncing the o in such words as box, hot, not, pot, and top with the lips rounded, forming an open o sound. The rest of us tend to pronounce this o more as the broad a sound of father.
- omitting, slighting, or shortening some r sounds, thus car, dear, and door sound like "cah," "deah," and "doah" to the rest of us. The broad a sound and the slighted r cause the rest of us to hear "pahk the cah in Hahvahdyahd"

Southern dialect could be divided into separate dialects for the upper and lower South or into several smaller dialects, such as the Virginia Tidewater, South Carolina Low Country, local dialects with Charleston and New Orleans as focal points, etc. In general, however, Southern dialect is used south and east of a line drawn along the northern boundary of Maryland and Virginia and the southern boundary of West Virginia, the southern part of Missouri and down through southeastern Oklahoma and eastern Texas. It is characterized by:

- the Southern drawl: a slower pronunciation than used in the rest of the country, combined with a slow breaking, gliding, or diphthongization of stressed vowels. Thus to the rest of us the Southern class sounds like "clae-is"; yes like "yea-is" or "yea-yis"; fine, I, ride, and time like "fi-

ahn," "I-ah," "ri-ahd," anduti-ahm" (these all being long i sounds).

- some of this slow dwelling on the vowel sounds weakens the following final consonants, especially d's, V's, r's, and t's, giving southerners such pronunciations as fin(d), he(l)p, se(l)f, flo(or), mo(re), po(or), yo(ur), bes(t), kep(t). (3) using such terms as the stereotyped Southern honey-chil(d) and you all as well as bucket (for pail), heap (for very), raise (for rear, children), reckon (think, judge), right (for very), snap bean (string bean), spigot (for faucet) and tote (for carry).

General American dialect is spoken in 4/5ths of the nation's area and by 2/3rds of the population, but is still a dialect. It is not called General American because that is what Americans should speak but because it just happens to be the dialect heard in the general regions outside of New England and the South. It is heard in the area which starts as a wedge between New England and the South, in western Connecticut, New York State, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, then broadens out to include West Virginia, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, northern Missouri, northwestern Oklahoma and west Texas, and finally encompasses the entire western half of the country. It actually includes at least four dialects: the North Central, the New York City Metropolitan Area dialect (including parts of Connecticut and New Jersey), the Middle Atlantic, and the Midlands dialect (Philadelphia to the Rockies and the Potomac to New Mexico, sometimes considered as separate Northern Midland and Southern Midland dialects). All these have more in common with each other than with the New England and Southern dialects, so can be grouped together as General American. It is characterized by:

- using the short flat a in such words as ask, brass, can't, class, dance, fast, grass, half, last, and path.
  - sounding the unrounded o in such words as box, hot, lot, not, pot, and top almost as the broad a in father.
  - the retention of a strong r sound in all positions, as caR, haKd, etc.
- Americans are still moving and communicating from one part of the country to

another. As easterners and mid westerners continue to move to the Sun Belt (1950s) the local Florida and Texas speech patterns will be diluted; as people continue to leave large cities for small ones and for rural areas, pockets of local dialects will tend to weaken or disappear. Perhaps someday in the future regional dialects will be no more. Then we may have only two dialects, that of educated, urban Americans and that of rural and poor Americans. Such dialects already exist, heard mainly in grammar and usage.

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