

English in Appalachia: A Diachronic Investigation of Dialect Change, Epicentral Impact and Language Variation

Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the diachronic development of Appalachian English (AppE) over the past century, planning to integrate morphosyntactic and sociolinguistic perspectives to reassess the current state and trajectory of this historically stigmatized American English variety. Full of a history of isolation, exploitation and hard living conditions, the mysticism around its heritage having long been disproven, the dialect and the culture that are at home in the mountains and hollers of Appalachia remain a fascination to many.

Building on previous work that suggests a decline in characteristic AppE features, such as the a-prefix, the project employs a multi-corpus approach combining historical and contemporary spoken data (cf. Wolfram & Christian 1976). Through quantitative analyses based on diachronic corpus linguistics and mixed effects modeling, the study examines patterns of feature retention, decline, and innovation, with particular attention to the processes of dialect levelling, koineization, supraregionalization, and the role of mundane mobility (cf. Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1999; cf. Hickey 2013; cf. Britain 2013).

The project further evaluates the applicability of epicenter theory (cf. Bernaisch, Gries & Heller 2022) to intra-language variation by contrasting AppE with General American and Southern American English to determine potential epicentral influences on dialect change. As dialect change and development may be regarded as culture-sensitive, by integrating linguistic, social, and mobility-related factors, the dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive account of AppE's development, contribute to theoretical models of dialect change, and assess the methodological value of epicentricity for dialectological research.

Keywords: Appalachian English; Dialect Change; Corpus Linguistics; Dialect Levelling; Epicentricity; Morphosyntax; Sociolinguistics.

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