

KEY ISSUE 3

Why Do Individual Languages Vary among Places?

- Dialects of English
- Distinguishing between Languages and Dialects

Learning Outcome 5.3.1

Describe the main dialects in the United States.

A **dialect** is a regional variation of a language distinguished by distinctive vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation. Generally, speakers of one dialect can understand speakers of another dialect. Geographers are especially interested in differences in dialects because they reflect distinctive features of the environments in which groups live.

The distribution of dialects is documented through the study of particular words. Every word that is not used nationally has some geographic extent within the country and therefore has boundaries. Such a word-usage boundary, known as an **isogloss**, can be constructed for each word. Isoglosses are determined by collecting data directly from people, particularly natives of rural areas. People are shown pictures to identify or are given sentences to complete with a particular word. Although every word has a unique isogloss, boundary lines of different words coalesce in some locations to form regions.

Dialects of English

When speakers of a language migrate to other locations, various dialects of that language may develop. This was the case with the migration of English speakers to North America several hundred years ago. Because of its large number of speakers and widespread distribution, English has an especially large number of dialects. North Americans are well aware that they speak English differently from the British, not to mention people living in India, Pakistan, Australia, and other English-speaking countries. Further, English varies by regions within individual countries. In both the United States and England, northerners sound different from southerners.

DIALECTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Major differences in U.S. dialects originated because of differences in dialects among the original settlers. The English dialect spoken by the first colonists, who arrived in

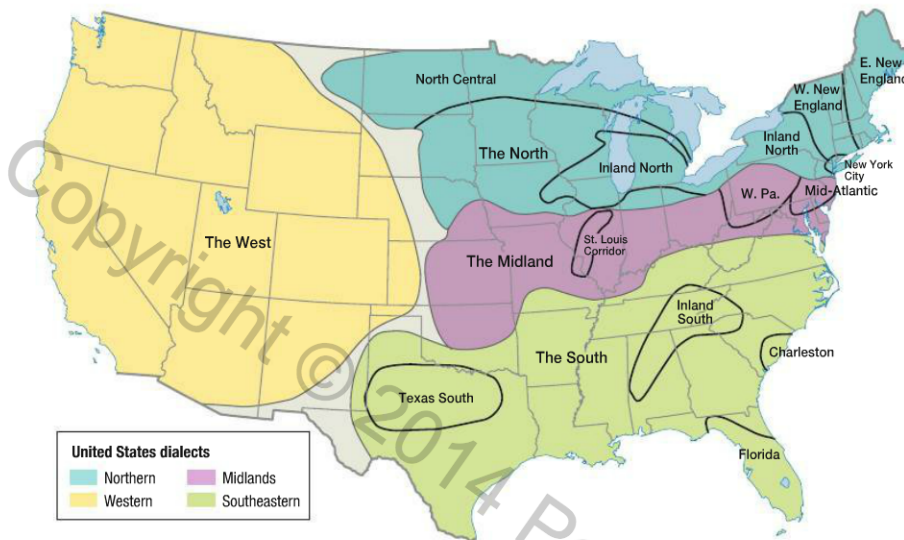
the seventeenth century, determined the future speech patterns for their communities because later immigrants adopted the language used in their new homes when they arrived. The language may have been modified somewhat by the new arrivals, but the distinctive elements brought over by the original settlers continued to dominate.

SETTLEMENT IN THE EAST. The original American settlements stretched along the Atlantic Coast in 13 separate colonies. The settlements can be grouped into three dialect regions (Figure 5-20):

- **New England.** These colonies were established and inhabited almost entirely by settlers from England. Two-thirds of the New England colonists were Puritans from East Anglia in southeastern England, and only a few came from the north of England.
- **Southeastern.** About half came from southeastern England, although they represented a diversity of



▲ **FIGURE 5-20 DIALECTS IN THE EASTERN UNITED STATES** The most comprehensive classification of dialects in the United States was made by Hans Kurath in 1949. He found the greatest diversity of dialects in the eastern part of the country, especially in vocabulary used on farms. Kurath divided the eastern United States into three major dialect regions—Northern, Midlands, and Southern—each of which contained a number of important subareas. Compare this to the map of source areas of U.S. house types (Figure 4-25). As Americans migrated west, they took with them distinctive house types as well as distinctive dialects.



▲ **FIGURE 5-21 U.S. DIALECTS AND SUBDIALECTS** The four major U.S. dialect regions are Northern, Southern, Midlands, and West.

social-class backgrounds, including deported prisoners, indentured servants, and political and religious refugees.

- **Midlands.** These immigrants were more diverse. The early settlers of Pennsylvania were predominantly Quakers from the north of England. Scots and Irish also went to Pennsylvania, as well as to New Jersey and Delaware. The Middle Atlantic colonies also attracted many German, Dutch, and Swedish immigrants who learned their English from the English-speaking settlers in the area.

The English dialects now spoken in the U.S. Southeast and New England are easily recognizable. The dialects spoken in the former Midland colonies differ significantly from those spoken farther north and south because most of the settlers came from the north rather than the south of England or from other countries.

CURRENT DIALECT DIFFERENCES IN THE EAST. Major dialect differences continue to exist within the United States. The three major East Coast dialect regions have been joined by a fourth that developed in the West (Figure 5-21).

Many words that were once regionally distinctive are now national in distribution. Mass media, especially television and radio, influence the adoption of the same words throughout the country. Nonetheless, regional dialect differences persist in the United States. For example, the word for *soft drink* varies. Most people in the Northeast and Southwest, as well as the St. Louis area, use *soda* to describe a soft drink. Most people in the Midwest, Great Plains, and Northwest prefer *pop*. Southerners refer to all soft drinks as *coke* (Figure 5-22).

PRONUNCIATION DIFFERENCES. Regional pronunciation differences are more familiar to us than word differences, although it is harder to draw precise isoglosses for them:

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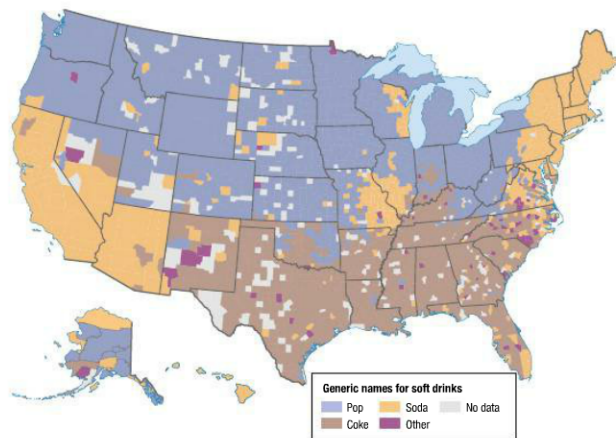
- The southeastern dialect includes making such words as *half* and *mine* into two syllables (“ha-af” and “mi-yen”).
- The northeastern dialect is well known for dropping the /r/ sound, so that *heart* and *lark* are pronounced “hot” and “lock.” This characteristic dropping of the /r/ sound is shared with speakers from the south of England and reflects the place of origin of most New England colonists.

It also reflects the relatively high degree of contact between the two groups. Residents of Boston, the Northeast’s main port city, maintained especially close ties to the important ports of southern England.

The diffusion of particular English dialects is a result of the westward movement of colonists from the three East Coast dialect regions. The northeastern and southeastern accents sound unusual to the majority of Americans because the standard pronunciation throughout the American West comes from the Midlands rather than the northeastern and southeastern regions. This pattern occurred because most western settlers came from the Midlands. The three eastern dialect regions can also be divided into several subdialects, several of which are shown in Figure 5-21.

Pause and Reflect 5.3.1

Does your English fall into one of these dialects? Why or why not?



▲ **FIGURE 5-22 SOFT-DRINK DIALECTS** Soft drinks are called *soda* in the Northeast and Southwest, *pop* in the Midwest and Northwest, and *Coke* in the South. The map reflects voting at www.popvs soda.com.

DIALECTS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Learning Outcome 5.3.2

Understand the main ways that British and U.S. English dialects vary.

“If you use proper English, you’re regarded as a freak; why can’t the English learn to speak?” asked Professor Henry Higgins in the Broadway musical *My Fair Lady*. He was referring to the Cockney-speaking Eliza Doolittle, who pronounced *rain* like “rine” and dropped the /h/ sound from the beginning of words like *happy*. Eliza Doolittle’s speech illustrates that English, like other languages, has a wide variety of dialects that use different pronunciations, spellings, and meanings for particular words.

As already discussed, English originated with three invading groups from Northern Europe who settled in different parts of Britain—the Angles in the north, the Jutes in the southeast, and the Saxons in the southwest. The language each spoke was the basis of distinct regional dialects of Old English—Kentish in the southeast, West Saxon in the southwest, Mercian in the center of the island, and Northumbrian in the north (Figure 5-23).

In a language with multiple dialects, one dialect may be recognized as the **standard language**, which is a dialect that is well established and widely recognized as the most acceptable for government, business, education, and mass communication. In the case of England, the standard language is known as **Received Pronunciation (RP)**. It is well known around the world as the dialect commonly used by politicians, broadcasters, and actors.

RP was the dialect used by upper-class residents in the capital city of London and the two important university cities of Cambridge and Oxford. The diffusion of the upper-class London and university dialects was encouraged by the introduction of the printing press to England in 1476. Grammar books and dictionaries printed in the

eighteenth century established rules for spelling and grammar that were based on the London dialect. These frequently arbitrary rules were then taught in schools throughout the country.

Despite the current dominance of RP, strong regional differences persist in English dialects spoken in the United Kingdom, especially in rural areas (Figure 5-23, center). They can be grouped into three main ones—Northern, Midland, and Southern. For example:

- Southerners pronounce words like *grass* and *path* with an /ah/ sound; Northerners and people in the Midlands use a short /a/, as do most people in the United States.
- Northerners and people in the Midlands pronounce *butter* and *Sunday* with the /oo/ sound of words like *boot*.

As in the United States, the main British dialects can be divided into subdialects. For example, distinctive southwestern and southeastern accents occur within England’s Southern dialect:

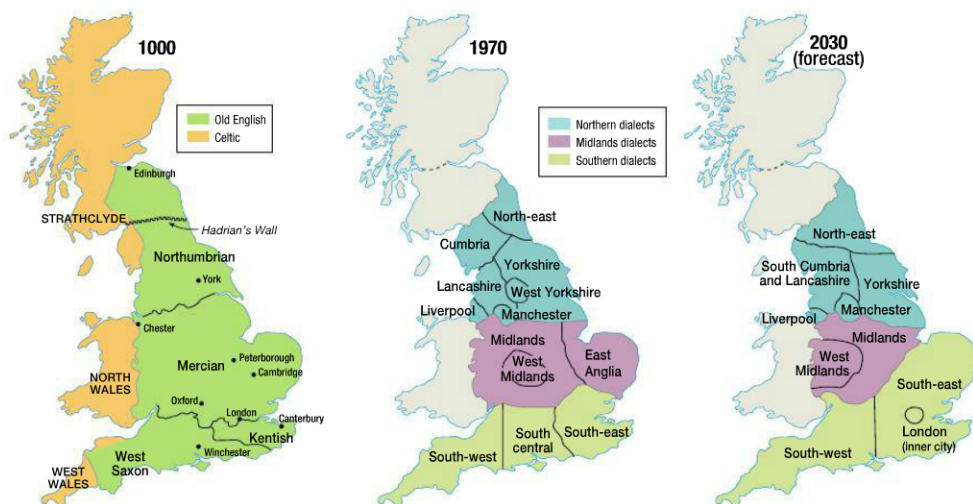
- Southwesterners pronounce *thatch* and *thing* with the /th/ sound of *then* rather than *thin*. *Fresh* and *eggs* have an /ai/ sound.
- Southeasterners pronounce the /a/ in *apple* and *cat* like the short /e/ in *bet*.

The isoglosses between English dialects have been moving (Figure 5-23, right). The changes reflect patterns of migration. The emergence of a subdialect in London reflects migration of people from other countries into the capital city, and the northern expansion of the southeastern subdialect reflects the outmigration of Londoners.

BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS

Why don’t Americans speak RP? The English language was brought to the North American continent by colonists from England who settled along the Atlantic Coast beginning in the seventeenth century. The early colonists naturally spoke

► **FIGURE 5-23 DIALECTS IN ENGLAND** Isoglosses between England’s dialects of English are changing.



the language they had been using in England at the time.

Later immigrants from other countries found English already implanted here. Although they made significant contributions to American English, they became acculturated into a society that already spoke English. Therefore, the earliest colonists were most responsible for the dominant language patterns that exist today in the English-speaking part of the Western Hemisphere.

Why is the English language in the United States so different from that in England? As is so often the case with languages, the answer is isolation. Separated by the Atlantic Ocean, English in the United States and in England evolved independently during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with little influence on one another. Few residents of one country could visit the other, and the means to transmit the human voice over long distances would not become available until the twentieth century.

U.S. English differs from the English of England in three significant ways—vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation.

VOCABULARY. The vocabulary of U.S. English differs from the English of England largely because settlers in America encountered many new objects and experiences. The new continent contained physical features, such as large forests and mountains, that had to be given new names.

New animals were encountered, including the moose, raccoon, and chipmunk, all of which were given names borrowed from Native Americans. Indigenous American “Indians” also enriched American English with names for objects such as canoe, moccasin, and squash.

As new inventions appeared, they acquired different names on either side of the Atlantic. For example, the elevator is called a *lift* in England, and the flashlight is known as a *torch*. The British call the hood of a car the *bonnet* and the trunk the *boot* (Figure 5-24).

SPELLING. American spelling diverged from the British standard because of a strong national feeling in the United States for an independent identity. Noah Webster, the creator of the first comprehensive American dictionary and grammar books, was not just a documenter of usage; he had an agenda.

Webster was determined to develop a uniquely American dialect of English. He either ignored or was unaware of recently created rules of grammar and spelling developed in England. Webster argued that spelling and grammar reforms would help establish a national language, reduce cultural dependence on England, and inspire national pride. The spelling differences between British and American English, such as the elimination of the *u* from the British spelling of words such as *honour* and *colour* and the substitution of *s* for *c* in *defence*, are due primarily to the diffusion of Webster’s ideas inside the United States.



▲ FIGURE 5-24 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH Numerous features related to a car are identified by different words in American and British English dialects.

PRONUNCIATION. From the time of their arrival in North America, colonists began to pronounce words differently from the British. Such divergence is normal, for interaction between the two groups was largely confined to exchange of letters and other printed matter rather than direct speech.

Such words as *fast*, *path*, and *half* are pronounced in England like the /ah/ in *father* rather than the /a/ in *man*. The British also eliminate the *r* sound from pronunciation except before vowels. Thus *lord* in British pronunciation sounds like *laud*.

Americans pronounce unaccented syllables with more clarity than do British English speakers. The words *secretary* and *necessary* have four syllables in American English but only three in British (*secret'ry* and *necess'ry*).

Surprisingly, pronunciation has changed more in England than in the United States. The letters *a* and *r* are pronounced in the United States closer to the way they were pronounced in Britain in the seventeenth century, when the first colonists arrived. A single dialect of Southern English did not emerge as the British national standard until the late eighteenth century, after the American colonies had declared independence and were politically as well as physically isolated from England. Thus people in the United States do not speak “proper” English because when the colonists left England, “proper” English was not what it is today. Furthermore, few colonists were drawn from the English upper classes.

Pause and Reflect 5.3.2

In British English dialect, *circus* has a second meaning in addition to a carnival with clowns. What is it?

Distinguishing between Languages and Dialects

Learning Outcome 5.3.3

Understand why it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between a language and a dialect.

Dialects are not confined to English; other languages, such as those in the Romance branch, have dialects. The Romance branch also demonstrates difficulties in distinguishing between dialects and distinct languages.

ROMANCE BRANCH DIALECTS

Distinct Romance languages did not suddenly appear in the former Roman Empire. As with other languages, they evolved over time. Numerous dialects existed within each province, and many of them are still spoken today. The creation of standard national languages, such as French and Spanish, occurred relatively recently.

SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE. Spain, like France, contained many dialects during the Middle Ages. One dialect, known as Castilian, arose during the ninth century in Old Castile, located in the north-central part of the country. The dialect spread southward over the next several hundred years, as independent kingdoms were unified into one large country.

Spain grew to its approximate present boundaries in the fifteenth century, when the Kingdom of Castile and León merged with the Kingdom of Aragón. At that time, Castilian became the official language for the entire country. Regional dialects, such as Aragón, Navarre, León, Asturias, and Santander, survived only in secluded rural areas. The official language of Spain is now called Spanish, although the term Castilian is still used in Latin America. Portuguese developed as a separate language because of Portugal's relative isolation on the west coast of the Iberian peninsula, especially after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Spanish and Portuguese have achieved worldwide importance because of the colonial activities of their European speakers. Approximately 90 percent of the speakers of these two languages live outside Europe, mainly in Central and South America. Spanish is the official language of 18 Latin American states, and Portuguese is spoken in Brazil, which has as many people as all the other South American countries combined and 18 times more people than Portugal itself.

These two Romance languages were diffused to the Americas by Spanish and Portuguese explorers. The division of Central and South America into Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking regions resulted from a 1493 decision by Pope Alexander VI to give the western portion of the New World to Spain and the eastern part to Portugal. The Treaty of Tordesillas, signed a year later, carried out the papal decision.

The Portuguese and Spanish languages spoken in the Western Hemisphere differ somewhat from their European versions, as is the case with English. The members of the Spanish Royal Academy meet every week in a mansion in Madrid to clarify rules for the vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation of the Spanish language around the world. The academy's official dictionary, published in 1992, has added hundreds of "Spanish" words that originated either in the regional dialects of Spain or the Indian languages of Latin America.

Brazil, Portugal, and several Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa agreed in 1994 to standardize the way their common language is written. Many people in Portugal are upset that the new standard language more closely resembles the Brazilian version, which eliminates some of the accent marks—such as tildes (as in São Paulo), cedillas (as in Alcobça), circumflexes (as in Estância), and hyphens—and the agreement recognizes as standard thousands of words that Brazilians have added to the language, such as flowers, animals, and other features of the natural environment found in Brazil but not in Portugal.

The standardization of Portuguese is a reflection of the level of interaction that is possible in the modern world between groups of people who live tens of thousands of kilometers apart. Books and television programs produced in one country diffuse rapidly to other countries where the same language is used. Refer to Figure 5-17, which shows an exhibit at the Museum of Portuguese Language in São Paulo, Brazil.

Pause and Reflect 5.3.3

Five hundred years from now, why might Spanish tourists in Peru not be easily understood by Peruvians if they speak their own version of Spanish?

DIALECT OR LANGUAGE?

Difficulties arise in determining whether two languages are distinct or whether they are two dialects of the same language. Here are several examples from Romance languages.

LANGUAGES OF ITALY. Several languages in Italy that have been traditionally classified as dialects of Italian are now viewed by *Ethnologue* as sufficiently different to merit consideration as languages distinct from Italian (number of speakers in parentheses):

- Emiliano-Romagnolo (2 million)
- Liguria (2 million)
- Lombard (9 million)
- Neapolitano-Calabrese (7 million)
- Piemontese (3 million)
- Sicilian (5 million)
- Venetian (2 million)

Refer to Figure 5-13 for the distribution of these languages (or dialects) within Italy.



▲ **FIGURE 5-25 CATALÁN** This sign warning that this is private property was written in Spanish. The graffiti is in Catalán.

CATALÁN-VALENCIAN-BALEAR. Catalán was once regarded as a dialect of Spanish, but linguists now agree that it is a separate Romance language (refer to Figure 5-13). Like other Romance languages, Catalán can be traced to Vulgar Latin, and it developed as a separate language after the collapse of the Roman Empire (Figure 5-25).

As the status of Catalán as a separate language is settled, linguists are identifying its principal dialects. Linguists agree that Balear is a dialect of Catalán that is spoken in the Balearic Islands, which include Ibiza and Majorca. More controversial is the status of Valencian, which is spoken mostly in and around the city of Valencia. Most linguists consider Valencian a dialect of Catalán. However, many in Valencia, including the Valencian Language Institute, consider Valencian a separate language, because it contains words derived from people who lived in the region before the Roman conquest. *Ethnologue* now calls the language Catalán -Valencian-Balear.

GALICIAN. Whether Galician, which is spoken in northwestern Spain and northeastern Portugal, is a dialect of Portuguese or a distinct language is debated among speakers of Galician. The Academy of Galician Language considers it a separate language and a symbol of cultural independence. The Galician Association of the Language prefers to consider it a dialect because as a separate language, it would be relegated to a minor and obscure status, whereas as a dialect of Portuguese it can help to influence one of the world's most widely used languages.

MOLDOVAN. Generally classified as a dialect of Romanian, Moldovan is the official language of Moldova. Moldovan is

written, like Russian, in Cyrillic letters, a legacy of Moldova being a part of the Soviet Union, whereas Romanian is written in Roman letters.

CREOLE LANGUAGES. Romance languages spoken in some former colonies can also be classified as separate languages because they differ substantially from the original introduced by European colonizers. Examples include French Creole in Haiti, Papiamentu (creolized Spanish) in Netherlands Antilles (West Indies), and Portuguese Creole in the Cape Verde Islands off the African coast. A **creole**, or **creolized language**, is defined as a language that results from the mixing of the colonizer's language with the indigenous language of the people being dominated (Figure 5-26). A creolized language forms when the colonized group adopts the language of the dominant group but makes some changes, such as simplifying the grammar and adding words from the former language.

CHECK-IN: KEY ISSUE 3

Why Do Individual Languages Vary among Places?

- ✓ A dialect is a regional variation of a language; the United States has several major dialects.
- ✓ Dialects vary based on vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation.
- ✓ The distinction between a dialect and an entirely different language is not always clear-cut.

▼ **FIGURE 5-26 CREOLE LANGUAGE** This note, written in French Creole in Haiti, shortly after a devastating earthquake killed 40,000 in January 2010, is the beginning of 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God."

