
Unvernacular Appalachia: an empirical perspective on West Virginia dialect variation

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Appalachian English speaks to the past and to the future

Introduction

Most popular discussions of varieties of English in Appalachia (USA) focus only on vernacular dialect features, suggesting that these hallmark characteristics are common for ‘true’ mountain folk (Dial, 1972). Naturally, the reality of the dialects in this region is more complex and subdued than the stereotype. While traditional features, such as *a*-prefixing (e.g. *she is a-working*), have played a role in the region, most stereotypical, Appalachian dialect features are fading from usage today (Hazen, 2006). Appalachia is a long region divided into numerous sections. Depending on the sources consulted, the regional divisions are quite staggering in their differences. For some, the region of Appalachia can stretch as far north as New York and as far south as Mississippi, including parts of 13 states (Appalachian Regional Commission). Other definitions limit the geography to a much smaller range (Wolfram & Christian, 1976). Aware of this problem, we have chosen to focus on one region universally accepted as part of Appalachia: West Virginia. Geographically, the state fits entirely within the boundaries of all definitions of the region. Likewise, West Virginia also fits the socio-economic profile most commonly associated with Appalachia. To provide the most comprehensive picture possible, we present a brief overview of English in West Virginia, followed by an empirical examination of 10 dialect features. The import of this empirical investigation is that the West Virginia vernacular of the twenty-first century has

changed from its roots at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Overview of English in West Virginia

Currently, West Virginia contains as much dialect variation as it has seen in the past. The dialect regions of West Virginia have no rigid boundaries and fluctuate according to rural and urban areas. On traditional dialect maps, the state of West Virginia is divided into four dialect regions. Two of these regions – the Northern Panhandle and the Eastern Panhandle – are under influence from urban and suburban areas in neighboring states, reflecting regional influence. The two largest West Virginia regions, the Lower North and Upper South, essentially divide the state into distinct southern and northern halves. This division is based on the works of Kurath and McDavid (1961), Carver (1987), and Labov, Ash, and Boberg (2006).¹

Natives generally recognize the Northern and Southern halves of West Virginia as distinct dialect regions. Every dialect atlas also makes this division across the state. Two other dialect regions are also marked as distinct in dialectology. The Northern Panhandle is viewed as part of the western upper Ohio Valley region, and the Eastern Panhandle is regarded as part of the upper Potomac Valley region. The Southern region is distinct from the other three by participating in the language change called the Southern Vowel Shift (Labov et al., 2006) where there are at least

four vowels changing qualities. First, the vowels in words such as *hit* are switching places with the vowel in words such as *heat* (e.g. *She made a hit* [hiɪt] vs. *Turn up the heat* [hi:t]). Likewise, the vowels in words such as *bet* are switching places with the vowels in words such as *bait* (e.g. *He made a bet* [beɪt] *on the game* and *The fish took the bait* [beət]).

Some features of English in Appalachia are socially stigmatized, despite their longevity through the centuries or their linguistic naturalness (Hazen & Fluharty, 2004). Throughout this paper, our claims of stigmatization derive from our speakers' impressions, as well as our observations of prescriptive practices in the area over the last few decades. Some examples of such stigmatization include the production of <f> in place of <th>, *birfday* for *birthday*. This production can be found throughout the English speaking world, since labiodental sounds, such as <f> and <v>, are far more

common in languages throughout the world than <th>. Also socially stigmatized is the use of the same form of a verb for both the present and past tenses. For example *She come home yesterday*, rather than *She came home yesterday*, is a common Appalachian feature. Throughout the history of English, *come* and *came* have fluctuated as the past tense forms, and in parts of Appalachia, it is not unusual to find *come* as the only form.

To account for the presence of many stigmatized forms, a popular myth arose at the start of the twentieth century, claiming that Elizabethan English was still spoken in Appalachia today. Varieties of English in Appalachia are diverse, but, for at least two reasons, this myth is an impossibility². First, Elizabethan English, spoken during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603), was never spoken in Appalachia; in 1603, Jamestown was only an idea, and major settlement in the Appalachian region did not begin until the eighteenth century. Secondly, all living languages change. Even if there had been a settlement of Elizabethan English speakers in Appalachia, and they had remained isolated until today, their great-great ... great grandchildren would not speak the same dialect as did their forebears.

However, several varieties have influenced English in Appalachia. The English of the Ulster Scots (Scots-Irish) and the English of southwestern England entered the region long before state boundaries were established. One modern dialect feature demonstrates a link to Scots-Irish heritage: *The children need separated* vs. *The children need to be separated* (Murray, Frazer, & Simon, 1996). This is an instance of *need* + past participle, which is also found in parts of the British Isles, especially Scotland. While this feature is stigmatized in some dialect regions, it is not seen as vernacular in West Virginia. Other Scots-Irish links exist in the English spoken in the Appalachian region. One particular pattern of subject-verb concord dates back at least six centuries. This pattern includes an -s attached to verbs, such as *The dogs walk_s* and *The people go_s* (see Hazen, 2000). This dialect feature can only be found rarely in regular conversation and only appears five times in our corpus. Previous studies found a slightly more robust subject-verb concord pattern (see Christian, 1978; Wolfram & Christian, 1976), but all studies agree that its use has declined over time in the eastern US.

In the popular imagination, English in



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Appalachia is usually characterized as a Southern variety spoken by the poorest residents. However, in terms of regional affiliation, it should be seen both as a Northern and Southern US variety. Socioeconomically, variation is stratified across social classes, which are very much a cultural and economic reality in Appalachia. Considering that most people only know Appalachia from the stereotypes, we hope that this empirical characterization of West Virginia language variation illuminates the complex diversity of English in Appalachia.

The West Virginia Dialect Project

To better understand the range of language variation in West Virginia today, we have compiled an evenly distributed corpus of 67 speakers whose interviews were transcribed orthographically. All together, the West Virginia Corpus of English in Appalachia (WVCEA) comprises over 600,000 words and is divided primarily by age, region and sex, and secondarily by ethnicity, social class and educational experience. Age is divided into three groups with the oldest group falling between 1922 and 1948, the middle-aged group falling between 1950 and 1979, and the youngest group falling between 1980 and 1989. The ethnic division is between African American and European American categories: With the recognition that the 'non-white' population in West Virginia is around only two percent, the six African Americans in the corpus were needed to provide enough tokens to make the ethnic division statistically available. In reference to education as a social factor, its intent is to categorize identification with higher educational goals and thereby assess social class from another angle. The educational division is clear: Speakers who have taken any kind of college class are classified as 'college' speakers. In other words, the 'no college' speakers have had no college experience.

The West Virginia Dialect Project examined ten dialect features that occur with varying frequency in West Virginia. Four of these features were analyzed qualitatively, while the other six were analyzed quantitatively. This exploration has allowed us to perceive a distinct trend away from traditional vernacular speech. A wide range still exists between more and less standard forms within West Virginia and the rest of Appalachia, but the population as a whole has not maintained the traditional

vernacular features of the early twentieth century. Of these variables, speakers use five of them less often. These include leveled *was* (e.g. *We was there*), demonstrative *them* (e.g. *She bought them berries*), *a*-prefixing (e.g. *She's a-working*), the *for-to* infinitive (e.g. *it wasn't for me to play sports*) and perfective *done* (e.g. *He done washed the dishes*). West Virginians are maintaining the other five dialect features at the same levels or at increased rates. These dialect features are the alveolar form of *-ing* (e.g. *We were walkin'*), consonant cluster reduction (e.g. *past* → *pas'*), vowel mergers (e.g. *pin/pen* with the same vowel), pleonastic pronouns (e.g. *My sister, she is a doctor*) and quotative *like* (e.g. *He was like, 'I'm not going'*).

The variables we have chosen to study fall across several social and linguistic categories. For the social findings, only the statistically significant ones are discussed. In terms of social stigma, several of these dialect features are stigmatized inside and outside the region, including *was* leveling, demonstrative *them*, *a*-prefixing, and perfective *done*. Dialect features such as pleonastic pronouns and consonant cluster reduction may be noted as different by people outside the region but are generally not stigmatized by native West Virginians.

In terms of linguistic categories, the variables come from morphology, syntax, and phonology. The dialect feature of (ING) variation is a strictly morphological variable because no phonological factors influence its occurrence. The variables of *was* leveling, demonstrative *them*, perfective *done*, *for-to* infinitives, and quotative *like* can be considered morphosyntactic variation since they are not influenced by phonological factors but syntactic factors do influence the alternation of the morphological forms (e.g. *them* vs. *those*; *she said* vs. *she was like*).

The variables consonant cluster reduction and *a*-prefixing are both instances of morphophonological variation. Both respond to different phonological environments: cluster reduction is more common before consonants than before vowels (e.g. *bes' keeper* vs. *best apple*) and *a*-prefixing is more common on words with syllable initial stress (e.g. *a-working* vs. *a-imagining*). Both also respond to morphological pressures. For example, consonant cluster reduction is more prevalent in monomorphemic forms (e.g. *past*) than in bimorphemic forms (e.g. *passed*). Strictly phonological variation is found with vowel

mergers. Potential vowel mergers as a dialect feature are phonologically conditioned in that only the phonological environment possibly constrains whether or not the vowels are merged, although mergers may be distributed unevenly across the lexicon. For many speakers in the Southern US, the vowels in *pin* and *pen* are merged much more often than *pit* and *pet*.

Extensive sociolinguistic and dialectological research on varieties in Appalachia have been sparse in recent decades. The most widely recognized and most often cited research on Appalachia, Wolfram and Christian's *Appalachian Speech*, is now more than 30 years old. Our approach has therefore focused on determining linguistic and social boundaries. By looking at a mixture of well-known features and less stereotyped features, we hope to provide an accurate representation of English in West Virginia.

Fading dialect features

Perfective *done*

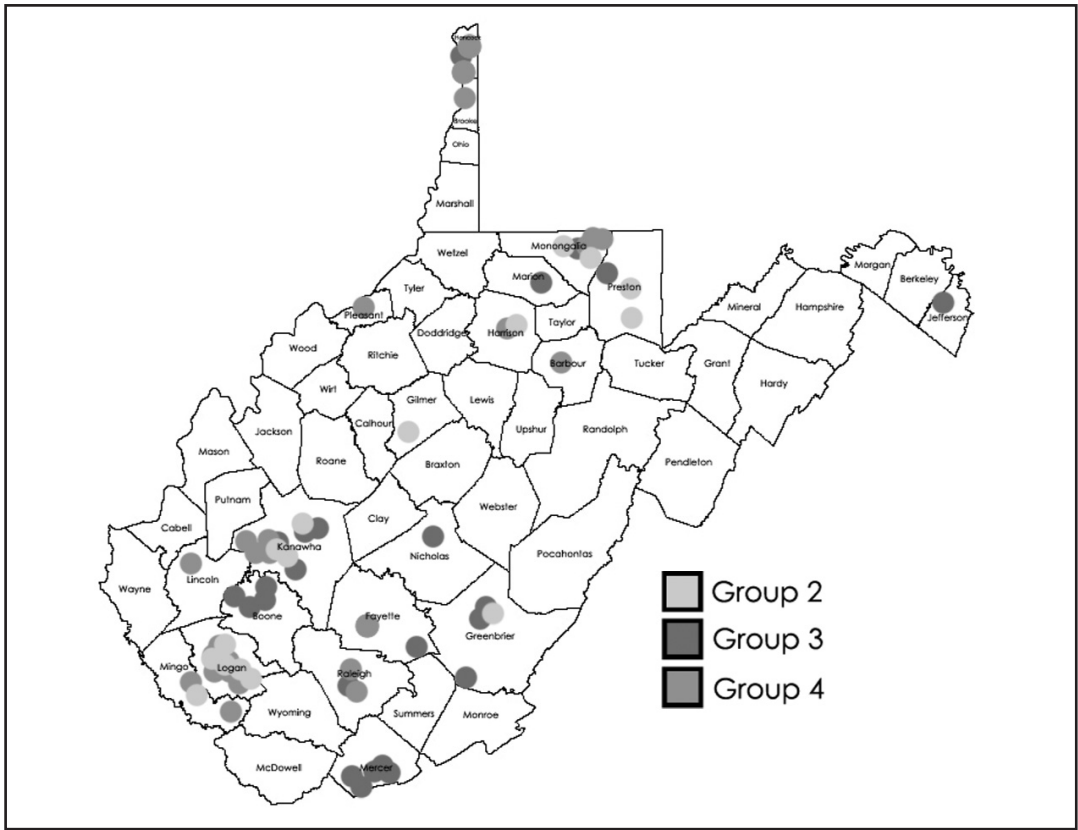
Perfective *done*, an auxiliary verb that indicates the completion of an action (e.g. *We done washed the dishes*), was analyzed qualitatively in our corpus. When perfective *done* is expressed, it functions as a part of the verb phrase, usually immediately preceding the verb, although there are instances when other specifiers come between *done* and the verb (e.g. *I done already put in for my social security*). Used similarly by all native ethnic groups across the US South, *done* is also used in British English, though with a different structure and slightly different meaning (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). Despite this widespread usage, perfective *done* is generally stigmatized outside of these speech communities, and it has become a sociolinguistic stereotype that is often employed in the use of racist or otherwise socially demeaning jokes. In regard to traditional dialects in West Virginia, it appears that perfective *done* is fading. Throughout our study, this feature was only found in the interviews of four speakers. Only two speakers in our corpus born before 1918 used perfective *done*. It was used once among speakers born between 1922 and 1947, once among speakers born between 1950 and 1979, and not at all among speakers born after 1980. In the early 1970s, Wolfram and Christian found perfective *done* to be part of the speech in Mercer and Monroe Counties. However, only a quarter of

their speakers provided any instances of perfective *done*, and of those who did, half of the tokens came from speakers over the age of 40. This feature has demonstrated a clear decline at the end of the twentieth century.

For-to infinitives

The *for-to* infinitive is the addition of *for* before an infinitive within a sentence (e.g. *Well, I guess it wasn't for me to play sports*). There appeared to be four separate types of *for-to* infinitives in our corpus, the first of which Montgomery (2004) defines as 'an infinitive ... introduced by *for* + *to* where general usage has only *to*'. Only three tokens (20%) were found of Type 1 (e.g. *Well, would you like for me to check your oil?*). It should be noted first that this type, though more vernacular than the other two, is not limited to the Appalachian region. Type 2 differs only slightly from Type 1 – the infinitive is introduced by *to*, as well as a following pronoun. Five (33%) of these instances were found in the examined corpus (e.g. *But we just felt we, we got to, the best thing for us to do was to move out of town*). Montgomery (personal correspondence) notes, 'the "for [+ pronoun]" could be deleted as understood, but then what is involved is a discourse constraint, not a phrasal one comparable to sentence type one.'

The third type of *for-to* infinitives present in this study deviates from the previous two in that no parts of the phrase can be omitted without changing the meaning. This was the most frequent type found in our data, characterizing seven (47%) of the fifteen instances (e.g. *Because the teacher was glad for us to come in playing music now and then*). Our findings indicate that this type of *for-to* infinitive is most prevalent throughout Appalachia, indicating its regular status as a part of the US English landscape. The final type of *for-to* infinitive is typified by *for* and *to* being adjacent to one another (e.g. *He's looking for to quit*) (Montgomery & Hall, 2004). However, none of these were exhibited in our data. Its absence was not unexpected: 'the "for to" form without an intervening [noun] is quite recessive in Appalachia' (Montgomery, personal correspondence). This feature is in its twilight as a traditional dialect feature: The oldest group of speakers in our corpus produced fourteen out of the fifteen instances of the feature present in our data. All but one of the speakers demonstrating this feature were



Age groups and their geographic distribution

born before 1947. Overall, this construction does not appear to be dominant in modern West Virginia, but certainly played a role previously in the region.

A-prefixing

Perhaps the most commonly known dialect feature of Appalachia is the use of *a-* as a prefix. The feature has roots stretching all the way back to Old English, as it is accepted as being derived from the preposition *at/on* (Montgomery, 2004). It originated in sentences like *She is at working*, meaning that the action was going on at that moment.³ The final consonant was eventually lost through a phonological change and the vowel became an [ə] attached to the verb. At one point *a-*prefixing was common throughout many varieties of English.

People around the world are exposed to this feature through various forms of media, including *The Dukes of Hazard* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, as well as comic strips such as the popular *Snuffy Smith and Barney Google* (Hazen & Fluharty, 2004). Of course portrayals

of Appalachian speech such as these are misleading, suggesting to audiences that these features occur with far more frequency than they actually do. *A-*prefixing is, in fact, not a common part of everyday English in West Virginia, even though it is a prominent sociolinguistic stereotype shared throughout the world.

*A-*prefixing is most often found attached to present participle verbs, but can also be found less frequently on past tense or past participle verbs (Montgomery, 2004). Of the six speakers displaying fifteen tokens of this feature, there was only one instance of *a-*prefixing on a past participle verb: *Then after the kids got a-married*. Perhaps even more important is the fact that there were no speakers found who used *a-*prefixing born after 1947. This absence in the younger portion of our corpus could be an indication that *a-*prefixing is on the verge of disappearing from English in West Virginia. This trend certainly coincides with the research done by Wolfram and Christian in 1976.

Since the southern portion of West Virginia is generally stereotyped as more Appalachian

than the northern region, one may expect to find such a renowned feature, such as *a*-prefixing, to be widespread in the southern half of the state. The numbers found in this study show the opposite trend. Of the six speakers who have *a*-prefixing, only two of them are from the southern region. It appears that college education has the greatest impact on the use of *a*-prefixing, as none of the speakers in this study who used this feature had any college education. *A*-prefixing seems to be a feature that is more often found among lower-class speakers with little education – a distribution that matches the trend of other syntactic and morphological variants, which are far more common among members of the working class (Chambers, 2002).

Demonstrative them

Demonstrative pronouns in modern English generally have four forms: *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*. The four forms are divided strictly by number (singular *this* and *that*; plural *these* and *those*) and loosely by distance (proximate *this* and *these*; distal *that* and *those*). For vernacular dialects, there is another option for the plural form: *them* as in *them apples are the best*. In variationist sociolinguistic research, the distribution of forms reveals choices in the community's grammar. From assessing the distribution of demonstrative *them* for these speakers, it appears that it alternates primarily with *those*. In this study, for example, demonstrative *them* is favored in distal contexts as is *those* (Hazen, Hamilton, & Vacovsky, 2011). Demonstrative *them* is also contrasted to *these* in contexts with animate complements: Speakers prefer combinations such as *them chairs* and *these people*, where *them* is paired with inanimate complements and *these* is paired with animate complements.

This dialect feature has been prominent in the stereotype of English in Appalachia and is strongly associated with stigmatized social perceptions. Most likely because of its negative stereotype, the use of demonstrative *them* has decreased dramatically across the generations. As this dialect feature became a regular part of the stereotype of various vernacular varieties, its usage decreased in West Virginia. Our oldest age group used demonstrative *them* 26% of the time for plural demonstratives. The younger two age groups used *them* less than 5% of the time. Despite the linguistic functions for demonstrative *them*, its usage declined greatly

over the twentieth century and primarily plays a role in overt performances of an Appalachian stereotype.

Was leveling

In vernacular dialects, speakers often pair plural subjects with the singular verb form of past tense *be* (e.g. *We was there*). *Was leveling* is one of the oldest language variation patterns in English. It continues on throughout the West Virginia region of Appalachia, despite the increase in social saliency and the decrease in overall frequency.

With 480 total instances of *was* in *were* environments in our data, 132 occurred with existential *there* and 348 in other subject environments. The overall rate of *was leveling* was 32 percent (480/1514). Due to the influence of existential subjects in Appalachia and in other varieties of English, their statistical impact has to be considered separately from other subject types. They simply appear to be a different species of subject-verb concord. In and of itself, the rate of leveling in plural existential environments was 55 percent (132/240). This higher rate appears to be in line with other North American communities, although it is not as high as previously found in Appalachia. With existential *there* set aside in the data, the rate was 27 percent (348/1274).

In standard *was* environments, the extent of *were leveling* is small, with only 2% in positive contexts and 3% in negative contexts. It is clear that *weren't leveling* is not part of language variation in this part of Appalachia, unlike Ocracoke (Wolfram, Hazen, & Schilling-Estes, 1999), London (Cheshire & Fox, 2009), and the Fens (Britain, 2002). In standard *were* contexts, *was leveling* is more prominent with 32% as an overall rate. This rate breaks down in the following way: In positive contexts for the 1413 possible tokens, 450 were realized as *was*, 32%. In negative contracted contexts, for the 99 possible tokens 30 were realized as *wasn't* (30%). For the corpus, there was only one negative noncontracted form (*were not*).

The kind of grammatical subject had a wide range of influence on the rate of *was leveling*, as has been found in most varieties of English. This should be expected considering English's history of inflectional subject-verb concord (Cheshire & Fox, 2009). Within this factor group, the highest rate of *was leveling* appears with conjoined NPs, albeit only 37 tokens were found in the corpus. The lowest rate in the

grammatical subject factor group came for the collective NPs, such as *people* and *all of them*. This category, which follows notional concord rather than grammatical concord, only mustered a rate of 20% *was* leveling, less than half that of conjoined NPs.

In looking across the social factors, three social factors are predictive for rates of *was* leveling: age, college experience, and social class. For age, a clear digression from oldest to youngest appears in the data, with the most precipitous drop happening between the oldest and the middle age group. The rate for the oldest age group is 54 percent (272/506). The middle aged and younger groups have rates of 12 (47/386) and 8 (29/382) respectively. For the cross tabulation of age and social class, the data distribution is not ideal, but a general trend is clear from the available results. In the two oldest age groups, where sufficient data is available for all three social classes, the social class effect on the rates of *was* leveling is apparent: the lower the social class the higher the rate of leveling.⁴

In comparing the oldest and youngest speakers, the effect of college aspirations is seen to be the same across apparent time, with those speakers with no college experience having dramatically higher rates. For college speakers, the rates decrease incrementally across the three age groups, with group 2 college speakers having 17%, group 3 college speakers having 13%, and group 4 college speakers having 5%.

Enduring dialect features

Pleonastic pronouns

Pleonastic pronouns are pronouns used as the subjects of finite clauses and also serve to sum up a preceding noun phrase. In this study, the pronouns 'he,' 'she,' 'we,' 'they,' and 'it' were all found to serve as pleonastic pronouns (e.g. *Amanda, she was loud*). Though pleonastic pronouns are present throughout English dialects in the United States, they are usually identified as a vernacular feature (Schilling-Estes, 2002). Both social and linguistic factors correlated with the distribution of pleonastic pronouns. Concerning social factors, in the West Virginia Dialect Project corpus, there were 19 female speakers and 20 male speakers who used pleonastic pronouns. The female speakers had 54% (60) more instances than the males (39), and the speakers with college experience had

75% (63) more pleonastic pronouns than did those speakers with no college experience (36).

Though long noun phrases usually accompany pleonastic pronouns in most dialects of English, shorter noun phrases of one, two and three words were more often found in the corpus. For US dialects, the shorter the noun phrase in this construction, the more vernacular it may be considered. Only three of the 100 occurrences of pleonastic pronouns found in this study had noun phrases of 10 words or longer (e.g. *But my baby brother who was a minister down at the little church down in Osage, he was stricken with cancer, so I came home to take care of him*). In addition, 61% (60) of the tokens found had one, two or three word noun phrases (e.g. *My brother, he lifted for a long time*). This tendency toward shorter noun phrases would be judged as vernacular by most US speakers. The largest linguistic predictor for pleonastic pronouns found in this study is the animacy of the content of the noun phrase. Animacy refers to the living nature of the subject of the sentence with the majority being human (e.g. *Now Jerry, he messed up his hand too, right?* vs. *Well, I mean, the cats, they are alright*). Ninety percent (89) of the pleonastic pronouns have animate subjects. This finding suggests a violable semantic constraint against inanimate subjects.

There is no evidence for a decline in the use of pleonastic pronouns. Our survey indicates that roughly the same number of speakers in each age group use pleonastic pronouns. Additionally, they produce roughly the same number of tokens. The social trends noted above, higher usage for females and those with college experience, might indicate an increase in its usage but no evidence from the apparent-time analysis supports this hypothesis.

Quotative like

In the twentieth century, quotatives were not often studied in English until a new dialect feature swept the globe. The use of *be like* to introduce quotes (e.g. *He was like, 'I'm not going'*) appears to have begun in the 1970s in the USA. Originally associated with the California region, quotative *be like* began its growth across American English in the early 1980s and has since become a world-wide phenomenon. Recent work has investigated its globalization and local influences on its functions (Buchstaller & D'Arcy, 2009). Quotative *be like*, still

under investigation in our current study, is a dialect feature that has left its mark on younger speakers in the West Virginia region. Older speakers in our corpus rarely use *be like* to introduce quotes, but for younger speakers, it is the quotative form used about 50% of the time. The next most used form is the verb *say* (e.g. *He said, 'I'm not going'*). This large jump between rare quotative *be like* usage for older speakers and its usage of *be like* as the predominant form for younger generations means that West Virginians adopted this innovative feature at the same time as other eastern areas of the US. All too often, Appalachia is characterized as isolated, and despite historians disputing this myth for some time, it persists as an explanation for social differences. The strong presence of quotative *be like* in the speech of West Virginians indicates that they were not isolated from rapid language change at the end of the twentieth century.

Consonant cluster reduction

One of the most ubiquitous features of English is the loss of the second consonant in a word final consonant cluster (e.g. *past* → *pas'*). For many varieties, this occurs when preceding another consonant (e.g. *past through* → *pas'through*), but in some vernacular varieties, this reduction also happens before vowels (e.g. *past all* → *pas'all*). In our corpus of West Virginia speakers, the linguistic influences on consonant cluster reduction pattern as they do in other communities. For speakers in West Virginia, bimorphemic words (e.g. *passed*) have their clusters reduced less often than monomorphemic words (e.g. *past*) (Hazen, f.c.). Additionally, West Virginians reduced their consonant clusters considerably less often before vowels than before consonants; in our corpus the rate before most consonants was above 80% but only 42% before vowels. Socially, no distinctive differences were found. In assessing ethnicity, sex, region, college experience, age, and social class, none of these subdivisions demonstrated any statistical differences. Although social factors have been found to be significant in other communities, in our study of West Virginia, consonant cluster reduction does not appear to have any social saliency. Apparently it is not stigmatized within the region. It continues at relatively high rates for both older and younger speakers and will continue to be part of West Virginia's vernacular future.

Vowel mergers

The front-lax merger has traditionally been a Southern US merger. Its effect can be seen in the contrast between words such as *pin* and *pen* pronounced the same but *pit* and *pet* pronounced distinctly. The low-back merger takes place for vowels in words such as *caught* and *cot* and geographically ranges from western Pennsylvania, spreading widely throughout the west. Traditionally in dialectology, the low-back merger has been seen as geographically contrastive with the front-lax merger. In West Virginia, both vowel mergers overlap for the majority of the state. Of 40 speakers surveyed, 19 of them demonstrated both mergers when reading from word lists (Hazen, 2005).

Several geographic distinctions did arise in our analysis. Speakers in the northern panhandle of West Virginia only produced the low-back (*caught/cot*) merger. Due to the absence of the front-lax (*pin/pen*) merger in the northern panhandle, this merger apparently has not breached the upper Ohio Valley dialect region. Since the northern region of West Virginia only exhibits the low-back merger, this merger might have been seen as a more Northern feature. However, surprisingly, it was more likely to be produced by Southerners. An explanation for this phenomenon should be formed by assessing the original situation of Southern vowels, rather than viewing it as a case of a spreading vowel merger 'skipping over' one dialect region to get to another. For much of the Southern US, speakers differentiated between the vowels in *cot* and *caught* by producing the vowel of *caught* as an upgliding diphthong. As the offglide of the vowel in *caught* has been lost, speakers more often produce the vowels as merged (see Irons, 2007).

Socially, every indicator points toward language change for these vowel mergers. Females, who often lead language change in Western society, clearly distinguish themselves from males: 68% of females, versus only 22% of males, have both vowel mergers. In terms of upward mobility, 52% of those with some college experience had both mergers whereas only 13% of those with no college experience had both mergers, indicating that higher social class status does not hamper the spread of these vowel mergers. For the apparent time analysis, only 13% of speakers over 40 had both the front-lax and low-back mergers whereas 56% of speakers under 25 years of age

had both mergers. In terms of these vowel mergers, the future of West Virginia is more dialectally unified than it has been over its 145-year history.

-ing

The variable (ING) accounts for the variation of the production of two morphemes: an alveolar nasal [-ɪn] and a velar nasal [-ɪŋ], as in *I was walk[ɪn]/[ɪŋ]* and *Walk[ɪn]/[ɪŋ] is fun*. At least in part, this variable has garnered attention because of its notoriety inside and outside academic circles. For over two centuries, non-linguists and linguists alike have discussed the prescriptive values of this variable. As reported in Houston (1985:338), Lowe (1755) provides the following homophonous pairs of words: *coffin* and *coughing*, *coming* and *cumin*, *heron* and *herring*. Each of these pairs indicates that the author was aware that <ing> was linked to an [n] articulation. Houston also found an early negative prescriptive evaluation in a 1902 editorial letter which decried ‘a disloyal crusade against the Queen’s English ... which ... will ... deprive present participles of their final ‘g’ (Houston 1985:338). This complaint is an indication that, at least by the twentieth century, the [-ɪŋ] was considered the unmarked form.

In order to examine this language feature, each instance of the variable in our corpus was coded for grammatical context, preceding and following place of articulation and the social factors. However, our results indicate that the only linguistic conditioning factor for this speech community is the syntactic context. Socially, the patterns of variation are considerably more complex than the grammatical patterns. A Southern-Northern divide exists in the production of variants, reflecting the sociogeographic boundary found by previous scholars. The other social factors work within this socio-geographic divide. Yet, contrary to most references to Appalachian rates of (ING), speakers in this sample are far from categorical, with rates ranging from 1% to 96% for the alveolar variant (Hazen, 2008).

At 22%, gerunds and adjectives have a lower rate of alveolar (ING) than do progressives and gerund participles, which have a rate of 67%. In the amalgamation that is the (ING) variable, nouns appear to be a separate category, insofar as statistical usage reflects grammatical competence. These linguistic results demonstrate that (ING) in West Virginia operates within the

same general constraints that have been found for other varieties around the world. Of the six social factors investigated for these West Virginian speakers, only two were not significant (Hazen, 2008). Females, Southerners, and those with no college experience all had higher rates of alveolar (ING) than their demographic counterparts. As expected, the rate of alveolar (ING) had an inversely proportional relationship with social class. Age was assessed for the entire corpus and differences between the age groups were observed, but none were found to be significant. As a widely recognized dialect feature, its steady continuation in West Virginia is an indication of this dialect feature’s lower vernacular status within the region. Yet the differences between the social groups, including sharp stratification by social class, points towards West Virginia’s speakers’ awareness of this dialect feature’s social meaning as a stylistic and social marker.

Conclusion

By examining the larger picture of English in West Virginia, as well as specific features that distinguish it, a clearer representation of this variety can be achieved. The wide geographic region of Appalachia contains many varieties of language. For English variation, a mix of Southern and Northern US dialect features comes into play. References to Appalachian English in the media typically limit their depictions to the region’s Southern affiliations, but in reality, a variety of regional, socioeconomic, and linguistic influences play key roles in defining the history and future of the variety. Stereotypes portrayed in popular media may be based on the traditional language variation patterns that Appalachians demonstrated at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, our profile of West Virginia, as an exemplar Appalachian state, reveals a much more diverse language variation landscape. The constellation of dialect features assessed in this article is part of both the past and partially the future for this region. Although these features may mark it as more vernacular than the rest of the US, the modern instantiation of English in this part of Appalachia is less vernacular than it was a century ago. ■

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Notes

- 1 Although their divisions differ as to where the lines enter and exit the state, the concept of a northern and southern half to West Virginia is upheld in all of these works.
- 2 For other reasons, see Montgomery (1998), who provides a history of the myth and the complete set of arguments against it.
- 3 The use of the verbal noun *ongoing* is first cited in 1637 (OED online): *The Lord who hath stopped the ongoing of that lawless process.*
- 4 There are two speakers in the Group 4 working class cross section, but neither one provided many past tense contexts.

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