

Speaking English: A Geographical Analysis of Dialect Distribution in Massachusetts

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Note: Figures may be found in the Appendix

Introduction

A language can provide details about a particular population, including their place of origin. For instance, the national language of the United States of America is "American English." This language distinction serves to separate American speakers from other English speakers—such as the population of England who speak the "Queen's English." Variations found within a main language can provide a more specific look at the geographical data imbedded in language distributions. These variations in speech patterns of members of the same country and/or culture are defined as "dialects." Dialects signify pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammatical differences in speech patterns (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2). Residents of the United States can easily be identified by dialect regions in the South, Midwest, and New England (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 91). These dialect regions have developed in the United States due to a variety of geographical influences including specific landscapes. A prominent example of dialects is found in the state of Massachusetts within the region of Megalopolis. Massachusetts contains a unique dividing line between the Eastern and Western dialects

in the New England region. Both the physical and cultural geography of Massachusetts have historically contributed to (and perpetuated) this East-West distribution of dialects in the New England area.

Physical Geography of Massachusetts— An Overview

The state of Massachusetts is located on the eastern shores of the United States along the Atlantic coast. The shape of the state is very distinct due to its boot-shaped peninsula projecting out into the Atlantic Ocean. This peninsula, along with the many convolutions of the coastline, were formed by the effects of glaciation during the Pleistocene Epoch. As these glaciers retreated, they created many of the site advantages of present-day Massachusetts and the majority of Megalopolis as well. For example, the glacial retreat formed estuaries (drowned river mouths caused by rising sea levels which resulted from the induction of glacial melt water). These estuaries produced deep natural harbors around Boston and several other large cities in Megalopolis which were crucial to the settlement of this area. Also, glaciation made Massachusetts "a series of hills and valleys"

("Massachusetts" 270). This pattern is reflected in the six land regions within Massachusetts: The Coastal Lowlands, Eastern New England Uplands, Connecticut Valley Lowland, Western New England Uplands, Berkshire Valley, and the Taconic Mountains ("Massachusetts" 282). (See Figure 1.)

One negative attribute left on Massachusetts' landscape from glaciation was the stony soils. As the glaciers retreated, they left behind rocky debris called till or finely ground rock material known as glacial flour (McKnight 522-523). This caused the soils to be mostly sandy and, therefore, not abundantly productive. However, the areas by major rivers, like the Connecticut River, and near the ocean tended to consist of fertile marshlands which were capable of crop production. Another feature which helped the farms along the coast can be attributed to a degree of maritime influence. The nearby oceanic waters served to moderate the land temperatures and actually provide some farming areas with extended growing seasons (Birdsall 26).

Effects of Topography on Dialect Distribution

When Massachusetts was first being settled in the eighteenth century, the topography of the state affected the settlement patterns of the arriving colonists—which, in turn, affected the distribution of dialects in that region. Most of the first colonists in the United States were from London and other surrounding areas of the Southeast corner of England. These colonists spoke a different pronunciation variant of English than the rest of the population in England—it can be defined as an "r-less" dialect. (See Figure 2.) In the "r-less" pronunciation dialect, the "r" sound in many words like "barn," "car," and "park" would be deleted, causing the words to sound like "bahn," "cah," and "pahk." As these first colonists from England landed their ships on the Eastern fringe of Massachusetts (in an area that would come to be known as Boston), they settled in the Coastal Lowlands region. This land region was relatively flat and quite fertile, with moderate forestation. This allowed the early colonists to maintain the agrarian lifestyle that they were used to back in England (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 97). Also, the flat land provided "effortless" cultivation without much manipulation of the landscape in order to create fields for the purpose of farming. The surrounding forests provided ample materials for the building of homes and for sources of energy for the early colonists, and the flat terrain allowed for the ease of transport of the forest materials back to the growing cities.

Later, when the Eastern population began to grow, "the immediate hinterland was rather forbidding" due to the rising Eastern New England Uplands (Kurath, Handbook 63). These uplands created "a maze of hills

which formed a natural barrier to trade East and West, North and South" (Kurath, Handbook 85). This area had "many rivers, but not one was navigable" (Kurath, Handbook 85). In response to these environmental observations, colonists initially restricted their population expansion from areas further inland. Instead, the colonists pressed exploration further down the coastline and established themselves along the ocean shorelines (Kurath, Handbook 63). These actions acted to concentrate the "r-less" English speaking populations and kept the colonists in relative isolation from the rest of the population centers in the New World, allowing the colonists to maintain their cultural practices and perpetuate the "r-less" language they brought over with them (Wolfram 97).

In the Western half of the state, colonists established themselves after the Eastern portion of the state had already been settled. The colonists here were not from the Southeast corner of England, and so they did not speak with the "r-less" dialect. Instead, these settlers, from the Western counties of England, spoke a form of English with the "r" being pronounced. In this "r-ful" pronunciation dialect, the "r" phoneme would be articulated and words such as "barn" would be pronounced as "barn." These "r-ful" speakers of Western England were fishermen by trade and came to settle the Connecticut Valley Lowland by navigating their way up the Connecticut River. This area is between "two parallel ranges of mountains: the Berkshires, forming the Western wall of the Connecticut Valley, and the Taconic Range, forming the eastern wall of the Hudson Valley" (Kurath, Handbook 101). These ranges acted to isolate these "r-ful" speakers from their counterparts in the East. This isolation served to strengthen a pattern of pronunciation that has continued to characterize this Western region. Even when the two spheres of settlement in the East and West converged, the pronunciation patterns were so established due to earlier physiographic isolation that the pronunciation distinctions remained prominent.

Effects of Climate on Dialect Distribution

The climate regions present in Massachusetts also contributed toward the separation of Eastern "r-less" speakers from Western "r-ful" speakers by contributing to a trend for "voluntary isolation" among the settlers. Due to the proximity to the Atlantic Ocean, the settlements of Eastern Massachusetts have a climate that experiences a maritime influence in which "moderated water temperature reduces temperature extremes in the air mass above the water surface," reducing the summer and winter temperature extremes in this particular area (Birdsall 26). The maritime influences cause much of the eastern portion of Massachusetts to experience a

humid subtropical (Cfa) climate type. In this climate type, Massachusetts experiences warm to hot summers with high humidity and mild winters with only a few waves of cold air masses (which can bring killing frosts to the region) (McKnight 223). The relative pleasantness of the Eastern climate type also allows for an extended growing season.

However, the Western half of the state, which is farther away from the ocean coast line, does not receive any impact from the maritime influences. This causes the Western region to be a humid continental (Dfa) climate type—characterized by short, warm summers and long, cold winters with abundant snowfalls which can cover the ground for up to eight months out of the year (McKnight 229). The amounts of snowfall in this region can make it difficult to find food and adequate grazing pastures for livestock (Kurath, *Handbook* 86). The length of these seasons can also reduce the growing season from two hundred to one hundred days (McKnight 229). All of these negative attributes of the Western climate type helped to keep the Eastern settlers clinging to the coastal regions and reluctant to advance their settlements inland—thus, keeping the “r-less” speakers together on the east coast. With the “r-less” speakers conversing with each other exclusively, the prominence of this pronunciation dialect strengthened in the eastern region. In fact, this eastern area of Massachusetts has remained a strong-hold for “r-less” speech all the way up to the present day.

Effects of the Soil Quality on Dialect Distribution

The variations in soil quality across the state of Massachusetts have also contributed to a myriad of vocabulary dialect differences due to the type of subsistence activities that the soils would allow. Because of the soil conditions described previously, the Eastern half of the state had fertile soil with underground peat deposits around the coast, but it was not extensive. The immediate surrounding areas had a “stony” soil type which was “not particularly fertile but yielding satisfactory crops to persistent labor” (Kurath, *Handbook* 64). Because of the difficulty of farming and the immense investment of time associated with it, farming was for an individual’s food purposes only and not as a means of industry. Farming was replaced by other industries that were more prosperous, like fishing and shipbuilding. Since these “early residents of Eastern New England made their living from the sea, . . . the traditional dialect is rich with nautical terminology” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 97). In this region, one would expect to hear such phrases as “nor-easter,” “lulling down,” and “breezing up” (Wolfram 57).

The areas that were more suitable for farming lay “in river valleys and near the coastline”

(“Massachusetts” 270). The highest quality and most expansive area of arable land was in the Connecticut Valley Lowland in Western Massachusetts. The peat, fertile soils, and tolerable climate offered good farming and livestock conditions in the Connecticut Valley (“Massachusetts” 282). This caused “the traditional Western New England dialect [to be] replete with terms pertaining to an agricultural lifestyle” and local farming practices (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 97). For example, some of the specific terms found in this area are “stone drag,” which “refers to a piece of equipment used for extracting stones from the rocky New England soil,” and “rock maple,” which “refers to the sugar maple, an important source of income for early farmers in Western New England” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 97).

Effects of Connecticut River on Dialect Distribution

The Connecticut River, “the state’s most important waterway,” runs straight north and vertically cuts the state of Massachusetts into relatively equal halves (“Massachusetts” 284). During the early years, as “r-less” speech and “r-ful” speech “were spreading vigorously from opposite centers,” the Connecticut River had allowed the spread of “r-ful” speech from the interior of the state and thus made Western Massachusetts a hearth area (an area of initial diffusion) for the “r-ful” speech (Downes 137). For the colonists living in the Connecticut Valley Lowlands, the “Connecticut River was central to trade” (Kurath, *Handbook* 94), providing an opportunity for a mingling of different cultures that was not experienced in the harbors on the east coast of Massachusetts. For example, the river provided relatively easy access to Long Island Sound, which presented the colonists with the opportunity to engage in trade with the growing Dutch settlement of New York City. Usually, when two or more dialect groups are brought into contact with one another, the differences between them tend to level out over a few generations of contact (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 40). However, since the Dutch also spoke a language that was “r-ful” in nature, the pronunciation of the “r” in the speech of the Western Massachusetts inhabitants did not experience any change and their speech patterns were reinforced in that area.

As a result, when the “r-less” Eastern colonists later reached the Connecticut River Valley, they were in a minority pronunciation dialect group and had little impact on the strong dialectal trends that were already in place. This essentially acted to stop the spread of Eastern Massachusetts “r-less” speech throughout the rest of the New England area and Midland (an area comprised of Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and Ohio) (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 27). The influence

of the Connecticut River can still be seen today as it acts as an unofficial boundary between those who would say, “Park your car in Harvard yard” from those who would say, “Pahk yah cah in Hahvahd yahd.”

Cultural Geography of Massachusetts— An Overview

Even though the colonists came from relatively the same cultural areas within the United Kingdom, they were from a diverse collection of ethnic and culture groups. When these groups immigrated to the United States, the “people from different speech regions tended to establish residence in different regions of America” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 93). For example, the “r-less” dialect speakers of Southeastern England “settled about Massachusetts Bay in the years between 1628 and 1640” (Kurath, Handbook 19). It is important to note that, at the time of American settlement, not all of the population of England spoke with the characteristic “r-less” style; only five percent of the world’s English speakers used this accent (Malmstrom 27).

These first “r-less” dialect settlers were largely Puritan and were “above average in education and material resources” (Kurath, Handbook 63). The concentration of well-educated, prosperous individuals led to the creation of the city of Boston which became the “cultural and linguistic center of Eastern New England” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 96). These culturally distinct settling patterns of Boston and other cities around the state automatically set up social class distinctions which also affected the spread of dialects in Massachusetts.

Effects of Social Class on Dialect Distribution

Social class distinctions had a major effect on the spread of dialect distributions in Eastern Massachusetts, more than in the western half of the state. However, the social class distinctions which affected the spread of dialects in Eastern Massachusetts reflected social class distinctions in the country of England itself. The “r-less” speech of Eastern Massachusetts first began among the elite upper-class members of England’s cultural center of London in the eighteenth century. This initial “loss of ‘r’ was a prestige innovation, and therefore related to the norm of higher status groups” (Downes 119). These early Massachusetts colonists were mostly British aristocrats from the London area who “spoke with the social dialect of their class”—which was “r-less” (Kurath, Word 4). The social groups in the western portion were mostly dominated by the lower farming class of England, which resulted in that area not being defined and stratified by other distinct

social classes. The rest of the population of England at this time was poor and spoke with coarse “r-ful” dialects which were recognized as “provincial (or peasant) dialects” (Kurath, Word 4).

The elite of London were among the first to settle the East coast of Massachusetts, and they brought their “r-less” speech to this area. These original settlers determined language patterns, “social customs and intellectual standards, which were accepted by later additions to the population” (Kurath, Handbook 62). This, in effect, set the “r-less” pronunciation as a prestige standard in Eastern Massachusetts. As the population of the colonizing aristocrats grew, the city of Boston was founded and served as an upper-class cultural hearth which proceeded to influence all successive groups of settlers to the eastern Massachusetts area. Essentially, the spread of “r-less” speech in “Eastern New England is in large measure the history of influence of Boston upper-class speech on the dialect of the seaboard” (Kurath, Handbook 11).

These elite maintained the prestige of their “r-less” dialects by extending their influence over the surrounding hinterland with the creation of seaport industry towns—like Boston. The ports served as “centers of cultural life and of high society which kept in close touch with London and dominated the back country socially and culturally” (Kurath, Word 2). The influence of the great city of Boston on speech patterns is second only to the original settlement history of the area (Malmstrom 7). Boston dominated “the regions around it, and their [Boston’s] speechways are copied by the speakers in these surrounding regions” (Malmstrom 7). The cultural prominence and influence of the “r-less” speaking elite provided motivation for the rest of the settlers to adopt the “r-less” way of speaking in order to make themselves a part of this upper-class society. Some middle class merchants and intellectuals even would send their children to be educated in London to cultivate the child’s speech pattern to the “r-less” way of speech in order to effectively mimic the Eastern Massachusetts elite (Kurath, Word 5).

Effects of Ethnic Contact on Dialect Distribution

As immigrants arrived on the eastern shores of Massachusetts, they diffused throughout the countryside and encountered various other ethnic groups whose linguistic patterns have affected dialect distribution. The settlements in the Eastern half of Massachusetts experienced a great deal of homogeneity because members from the same church denomination would sail and settle together as neighbors, and the surrounding lands would be occupied by successive generations (Kurath, Handbook 63). Also, most of following groups of colonists that settled here were from the same

Southeast section of England and spoke with the same “r-less” dialect. Local dialects are able to “thrive when communities are isolated” from other dialect speakers (MacNeil 20). This pattern of settlement, coupled with the fact that “eastern settlements did not establish contact with the settlements on the Connecticut River” until 1735, caused the area to develop a high-density, multiplex network of communication (Kurath, *Handbook* 8). In other words, everybody knew everybody and talked with each other in multiple social spheres. This type of network acted to preserve localized “r-less” language varieties (Wolfram 33).

On the other side of the state, because “Western New England has been more hospitable to [linguistic] innovations than the secluded Eastern Area, features that are now encountered only in the east may be relics of usage now abandoned in the west” (Kurath, *Handbook* 5). Western Massachusetts encountered more dialectal change due to the fact that more ethnic groups came into contact with each other in this region. The Connecticut Valley Lowlands and the lands beyond them were considered the “frontier” areas in the 1600s. The incoming immigrants from the British Isles and Germany (who had “r-ful” languages) would come to the frontier to acquire land in order to start a new life in the United States, bypassing the “r-less” speech region of Boston. Dialects “were blended anew when settlers from different colonies mingled on the frontier” (Kurath, *Word* 4). This diversity in the Western half of Massachusetts led to the creation of low-density, uniplex networks of communication (individuals talked to a limited number of others in just one social sphere) that “were quicker to adopt language features from outside their local communities” (Wolfram 33). Therefore, since the tendency toward “r-ful” speech was dominant in the Western region, residents here adopted the “r-ful” pronunciation dialects.

Effect of Economy and Trade on Dialect Distribution

Because the Eastern seaboard’s economy was based on sea trade, it allowed Eastern Massachusetts to retain specific connections with England; this connection helped the region to preserve its “r-less” dialect. Massachusetts, along with the rest of the Atlantic seaboard states, is located along the great circle route between the Caribbean and Europe which made the state a prime area for establishment of a port. The main port city of Boston was an optimal place for British sailors to trade and do business. This constant visitation of “r-less” pronouncing English sailors acted to reinforce the “r-less” speech patterns that were already established in this area. The colonists of Western Massachusetts, on the other hand, were located too far inland to experience any form of continual communication with England.

This trade that Eastern Massachusetts had with England effectively caused the East to have “closer ties with the mother country across the sea than with its sister colonies on this side of the Atlantic” (Kurath, *Word* 1). Also, the economic profit that followed this method of trade caused the settlers of Eastern Massachusetts to stay near the core city of Boston and the adjoining areas, rather than migrating westward (Kurath, *Word* 2). This acted to concentrate, preserve, and even expand the “r-less” dialects present in this region. Boston “became socially and culturally outstanding, as well as economically powerful, thus dominating the areas surrounding it” (Marckwardt 146). An effect of this economic power was that in Boston’s outlying areas “local expressions and pronunciations . . . came to be replaced by new forms of speech emanating from the cosmopolitan center” (Marckwardt 146). The economic power of Boston strengthened and expanded the territory in which the “r-less” pronunciation dialect was spoken.

Effects of Prevailing Area Attitudes on Dialect Distribution

The attitudes of the arriving colonists was another factor that influenced the distribution of dialects in the region of Massachusetts. When the colonists arrived in New England, they strove to physically build a society that would be seen as a “New England.” This prevailing attitude can be illustrated through the commonalities present in the name of cities, water bodies, and streets in Massachusetts and England. The settlers “brought with them a host of names for places familiar to them in their country, which they immediately applied to their newly created settlements” (Marckwardt 157). These names served a commemorative purpose and honored the monarchs of England—such as Cape Ann in Eastern Massachusetts (Marckwardt 157). Even the city of “Boston, Massachusetts, was named for the city in Lincolnshire [England]” (Marckwardt 157).

With this replication of place names, there was also the replication of place dialects. The colonists originally from Southeast England in the Eastern half of Massachusetts had a strong degree of “accent loyalty” and strove to consciously maintain their original “r-less” pronunciation dialect (Downes 219). Conversely, the colonists in Western Massachusetts from the Western shores of England fought to sustain their “r-ful” dialects. Both halves of Massachusetts actively preserved their dialect speech to reflect the areas from which they had originally immigrated.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the Eastern-Western dialect boundary that exists in present-day Massachusetts has historically resulted from a number of geographical influences that can be attributed to both physical and cultural features. The physical features of Massachusetts—such as topography, climate, soils, and waterways—acted to influence settlement patterns of the early colonists and to initiate the separation between “r-less” and “r-ful” speech patterns. Certain cultural features—such as social class, ethnic contact, trade, and local attitudes—then served to sustain and perpetuate these dialectal differences. Given this analysis, one can understand how various geographic influences have helped to shape the present-day dialectal landscape of Massachusetts.

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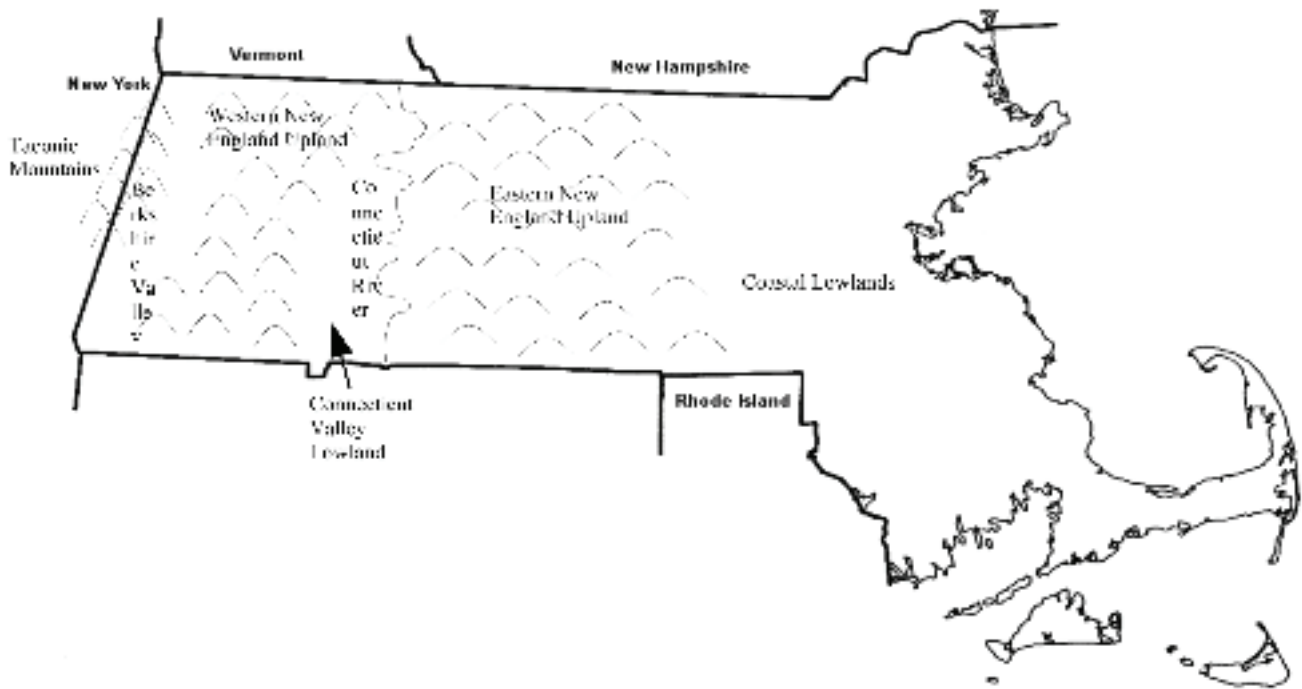


Figure 1: An illustrative representation of the physical geography of the state of Massachusetts. (Adapted from “Massachusetts” 282).



Figure 2: A representation of the r-pronouncing areas (shaded) in England. (Adapted from Crystal 87).

Dialects are linguistic varieties which may differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, spelling and grammar. For the classification of varieties of English in terms of pronunciation only, see Regional accents of English. Dialects can be defined as "sub-forms of languages which are, in general, mutually comprehensible." English speakers from different countries and regions use a variety of different accents (systems of pronunciation), as well as various localized words and grammatical constructions; many Distributional Pattern Geographical Location Basic Data Geographical Distribution Data File. These keywords were added by machine and not by the authors. This process is experimental and the keywords may be updated as the learning algorithm improves.Â Robert F. Dakin, *The Dialect Vocabulary of the Ohio River Valley: A Survey of the Distribution of Selected Vocabulary Forms in an Area of Complex Settlement History*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1966. 3 vols. A summary of the major findings of his dissertation appears in "South Midland Speech in the Old Northwest," *Journal of English Linguistics*, 5 (1971), 31-48. Google Scholar. 10.