The linguistic consequences of the Industrial Revolution: Competing external causations in the evolution of American English

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One of the most important findings to emerge from the past generation of research on American English is the stability of the line separating the Inland North and Midland dialect regions. The linguistic divide across the North-Midland boundary, established by Hans Kurath and his associates mainly on the basis of lexical features (Kurath 1949, Carver 1990), has widened in recent decades with the progress of the Northern Cities Shift. Labov (2010) seeks the origins of this divide in the settlement history of the Midwest, and argues that the cultural ideology of the Yankee settlers from New England and upstate New York, with their religious revivalism and fierce opposition to slavery, furthered the divergence between the speech of the Great Lakes region and that of the Upland Southerners who settled the areas immediately to the south.

Although it seems very likely (as per the Founder Effect) that patterns of early settlement played an important role in establishing the North-Midland line, I argue that the remarkable persistence and robustness of this isogloss more immediately reflect the major social and demographic upheavals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In particular, the Industrial Revolution and consequent mass immigration, mainly from southern and eastern Europe, radically altered the ethnic makeup and and socioeconomic structure of the major industrial centers of the Inland North. The effects of this transformation are still clearly visible in a range of political and cultural patterns, from unionization and voting behavior, to religious affiliation and identity politics, to sports and other leisure activities.

More than the pre-Civil War divide between Yankees and Midlanders, it is this cultural and ideological opposition between the "white ethnic" industrial core and "all-American" heartland that underlies the continuing linguistic divergence between these two neighboring regions, despite frequent movement and face-to-face interaction across the North-Midland boundary. This hypothesis has important consequences for other unexplained cases of stable dialect geography, in which rapid demographic transformation has combined with already existing language-internal factors to reinforce longstanding isoglosses.

References

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