WHY DIALECTOLOGY?

by
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Practicing dialectologists, myself included, are usually too busy practicing dialectology to step back and ask why they should be doing what they are doing. If we take that step, we will find that we are really trying to answer two questions: first, why study language variation, and second, why pursue dialectology rather than linguistic theory or sociolinguistics. On the first question, it is clear that people in general are interested in how different people speak in different ways, whether according to region, class, or other characteristics. That is reason enough to investigate variation – but we should not forget that our inquiry has popular roots. On the second point, I hope to suggest that dialectology has, and should have, its own identity as distinct from sociolinguistics or general linguistic theory, and that therefore dialectology should remain one of the choices on the menu for the study of language.

Not long ago a colleague in sociolinguistics complained that I always started my papers in the middle of things and never talked about first principles; he was right, and I ask your indulgence in this essay to try to remedy that lack. Practicing dialectologists, myself included, are usually too busy practicing dialectology to step back and ask why they should be doing what they are doing. If we take that step, we will find that we are really trying to answer two questions: first, why study language variation, and second, why pursue dialectology rather than linguistic theory or sociolinguistics. On the first question, it is clear that people in general are interested in how different people speak in different ways, whether according to region, class, or other characteristics. In this essay there will be space to suggest a few things about the relationship of dialectology to such general interest, and then just to mention the second point in brief.

The first, best, and sufficient reason for doing dialectology is that people habitually notice and are interested in language variation. This fact hardly needs any illustration, but I will offer one anyway so that I can talk about the dynamics of people's interest. Recently when my family was out for dinner in Athens, Georgia, my wife asked the waiter, 'You're not from around here, are you? I can tell by the way you talk'. The waiter replied, 'You're right, ma'am; I'm from Massachusetts'. My wife then turned to me and said, 'I just *knew* it. I

thought he sounded like he was from B[a]ston. I'm pretty well trained, aren't I?' For all her excellent education, my wife had not been well-trained about language variation. She had merely made a judgment based on her perception of the waiter's pronunciation, and she was pleased when she was right. It had to be pronunciation features that she noticed, for the waiter had uttered only a sentence or two, polite and standard waiter talk. The setting made it a rather complex judgment. My wife and I are Northerners, transplanted for many years in the South; we can now produce the occasional *y'all* or *might could*, but nobody would mistake us for real Southerners. When my wife questioned the waiter, therefore, she was actualizing her perception of at least a three-way split in possible pronunciation; her speech was not Southern, the waiter's speech was not Southern but also not Inland Northern like ours, and she guessed that it was Eastern New England.

Why exactly the question rose into her consciousness we cannot tell, and she could not tell me, either, when I asked her. We never really know about specific motivations for actions that are so natural, so basic to us, but that is no reason to assign my wife's question merely to curiosity or academic interest. The act of speech identification meant something to her beyond the perception of different vowels. One practical possibility is knowledge of regional customs: when you ask Southern waiters to bring you *tea* you get something cold and sweet, while Northern ones bring you something hot and unsweetened. As it happens, however, we had not ordered tea, and there was no occasion for so practical a reason. Her motivation might have had more to do with kindred feeling, that the waiter and our family together were strangers in a Southern environment. There were no further comments along that line by the waiter or the family, however, so no confirmation of any Yankee conspiracy.

In the end, the best reason for her to ask the waiter about his speech was to establish the cultural identity of the speakers in the transaction. This idea parallels the major claim of the creolists Robert LePage and Andree Tabouret-Keller in their influential book, *Acts of Identity* (1985). I agree with Suzanne Romaine that 'the value of [LePage's] theoretical perspective lies in its general applicability to both multilingual and multilectal settings' (1982:11). Cultural identity was the real point when my wife confirmed the waiter's non-Southern origins. While there was potential for future practical or conversational interactions in which identity might have had a

practical role, no immediate practical purpose was present; the act of cultural identification was not 'functional' in the sense usually adduced by linguists as the motivation for some linguistic fact or change. Lack of practical purpose did not make my wife's question about speech frivolous, or inconsequential, but rather betrayed just how deeply we care about the cultural identities projected by our speech and perceived in the speech of others. Speech, here described in North American regional terms, was an important part of who we were, and in conversational interactions between patron and waiter – as in most casual contact between people who do not expect a continuing relationship – speech is one of the few readily discernible characteristics of identity. In the limited interaction appropriate to waiters and patrons, my wife's question let us know, in a sense, who he was, and so allowed us to predict how he might act. We did not automatically attribute to the waiter a Boston stereotype as puritanical, Irish, Catholic, and a Red Sox fan – that way lies prejudice – but we did know that if we wanted tea, we had better ask for it iced.

Of course there are other clues for both waiters and patrons about the person with whom one is dealing. Perhaps some of the other clues are sometimes more important than speech identification – but still my wife did ask the question and get a ready answer. In many circumstances it is either not appropriate or not possible explicitly to determine some interlocutor's membership in a cultural group, but still we use information from linguistic cues to guide the conversational transaction. We take the absence of folk grammatical forms to indicate that an interlocutor has some education. We take the presence of occupational argot as evidence of some preparation or experience in a field; we take misused occupational argot as a sign of incompetence. While we believe that somebody's speech tells us something about them, we also know that people alter their speech for every occasion with greater or lesser degrees of talent. We are sensitive to language in conversations that we think too inflated and pompous for the circumstances, or language too much from the locker room for the circumstances, and we try to match such usage with assertion of prestige, assumption of familiarity, or other motivations. Most of us can do this well; we realize it because we see that we each adjust our speech to the circumstances as we perceive them, and because we notice when people fail to adjust appropriately.

Psychological brinkmanship is simultaneously one of the joys and the frustrations of spoken discourse. And amidst all the complications, we do care about regional affiliation as shown through speech, whether presented to us with full regalia of pronunciation and other regional features, or presented to us only through occasional and subtle clues. Dialects happen conversation by conversation, one person at a time.

Dialectologists cannot be satisfied with one conversation, or the evidence of one person. We wish to make statements that might help to describe or to explain many different conversations. In the Linguistic Atlas tradition, dialectology begins specifically with a conversation between a field worker and a representative speaker. What makes conversation into dialectology is that the event is repeated many times throughout a population according to a systematic plan. Even if dialectologists do no more than report the results of those conversations, as distilled into separate words and phrases for the transcriptions on maps for the *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (LANE; Kurath et al. 1939-43), they make implicit generalizations about the probability that particular linguistic features might be spoken by people at particular locations in the survey area. For example, in LANE there is a map (89) for *clearing up*, from the question about improving weather. The thing to look for is who says what where. There are lots of instances of phrases with *clearing* everywhere, but fewer instances of *breaking and fairing* phrases; the latter might be seen to occur more often near each other, in clumps or clusters. Thus, to make a generalization from what remains implicit on the map, *clearing* is a widely used form, but *breaking and fairing* have more limited distributions. So, if *breaking and fairing* are used by somebody we are talking to, our knowledge of their geographical distribution provides us with a clue about where our speaker might be from. Figures 1 and 2 show a transformation of the data that makes the probabilities fully explicit. Here are maps from the Middle and South Atlantic survey area for *breaking* and *fairing* which assign a probability, an actual figure, for the occurrence of the feature for each coordinate of the survey region. Another kind of survey and presentation, that for the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE; Cassidy et al. 1985-), also offers tells its readers who says what where; each DARE entry says that its headword does occur in certain regions, and was therefore not found in others. This approach is usually not probabilistic in the same way as Atlas presentations, but there are labels that tend in that direction, as do

DARE's dot maps. Finally, dialectologists who have not carried out large surveys still participate in the same process: they document the occurrence of linguistic features, sometimes with enough evidence to allow a probability judgment, for particular limited areas or groups. Studies large and small can document the usage of words in different places.

In this way dialectology directly recapitulates the way that we all assess each others' regional speech in daily conversations. Each of us has experience, some more and some less, with different speakers from different places, and on the basis of that experience we make guesses about where our interlocutors might be from, and thus in some way who they are. We are not always right – my wife was *pleased* to have identified Boston speech from the incidence of the low vowels – but we do the best we can with the experience we have available. The advantage of dialectology is that it can substitute systematically-collected, broad-based experience for the hit-or-miss experience of each of us individually. It should be able to do a better job than any individual about matching linguistic features with places because it has better information at its disposal. While geographical distributions were the main target of American atlas projects, information about social characteristics like age or level of education of the speakers interviewed was also collected there and in other studies, so that it is also possible to consider the distribution of single features against an age or education scale. With that information, dialectologists are able to speculate about where a particular speaker might live and in what social circumstances they might interact, if that speaker employs a particular linguistic feature of known distribution.

Let us be clear, however, about what dialectology actually does and cannot do. Dialectologists record information about the distribution of single features. However, the surveys of dialectologists, atlas-style or others, do not yield a common set of dialect regions with sharp boundaries. Lee Pederson (1995) concisely describes dialectology as a 'taxonomy of observed sociolinguistic facts', but goes on to explain that

> the research invariably implies more than that because planners, editors, and their critics fail to characterize the work at hand. For that reason, a reader expects an identification of dialect areas and a description of dialects within those geographic divisions in a

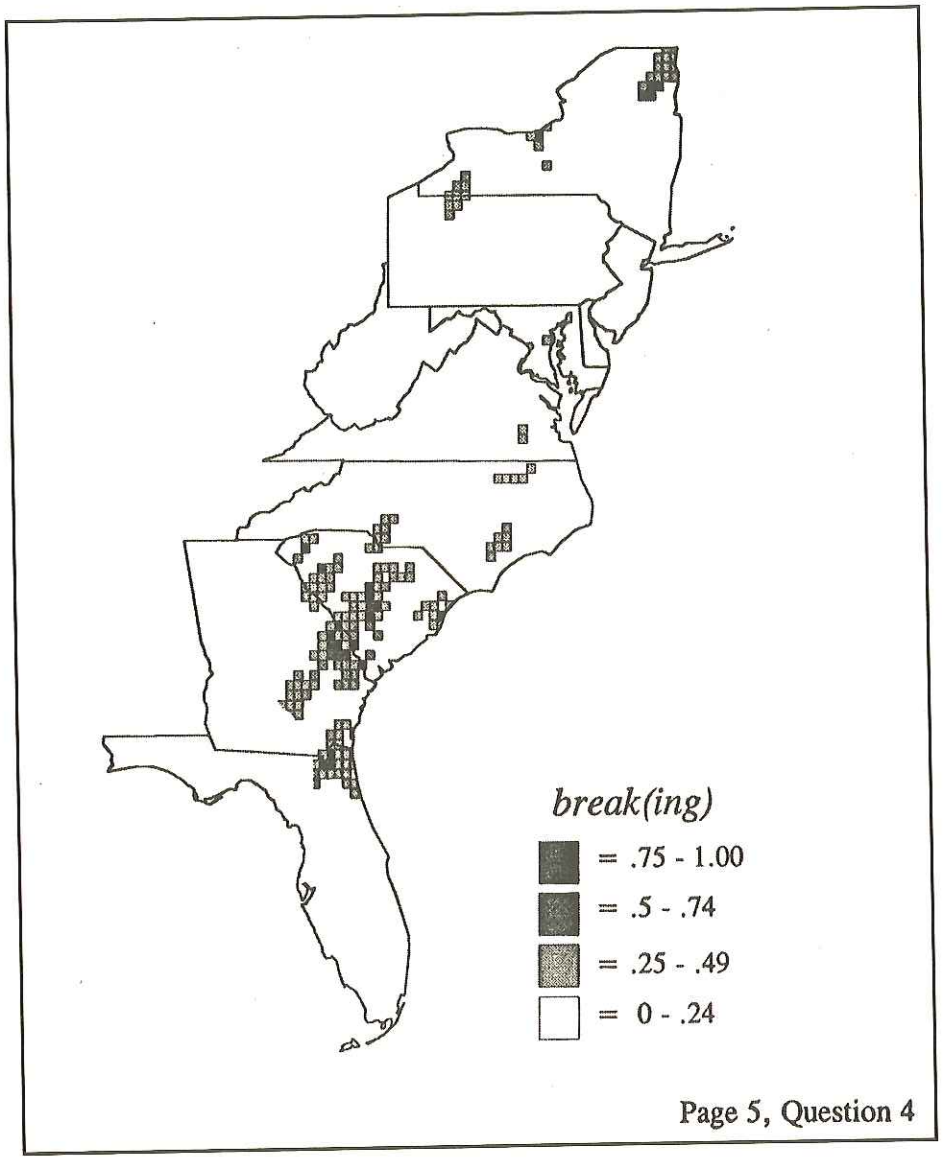


Figure 1.

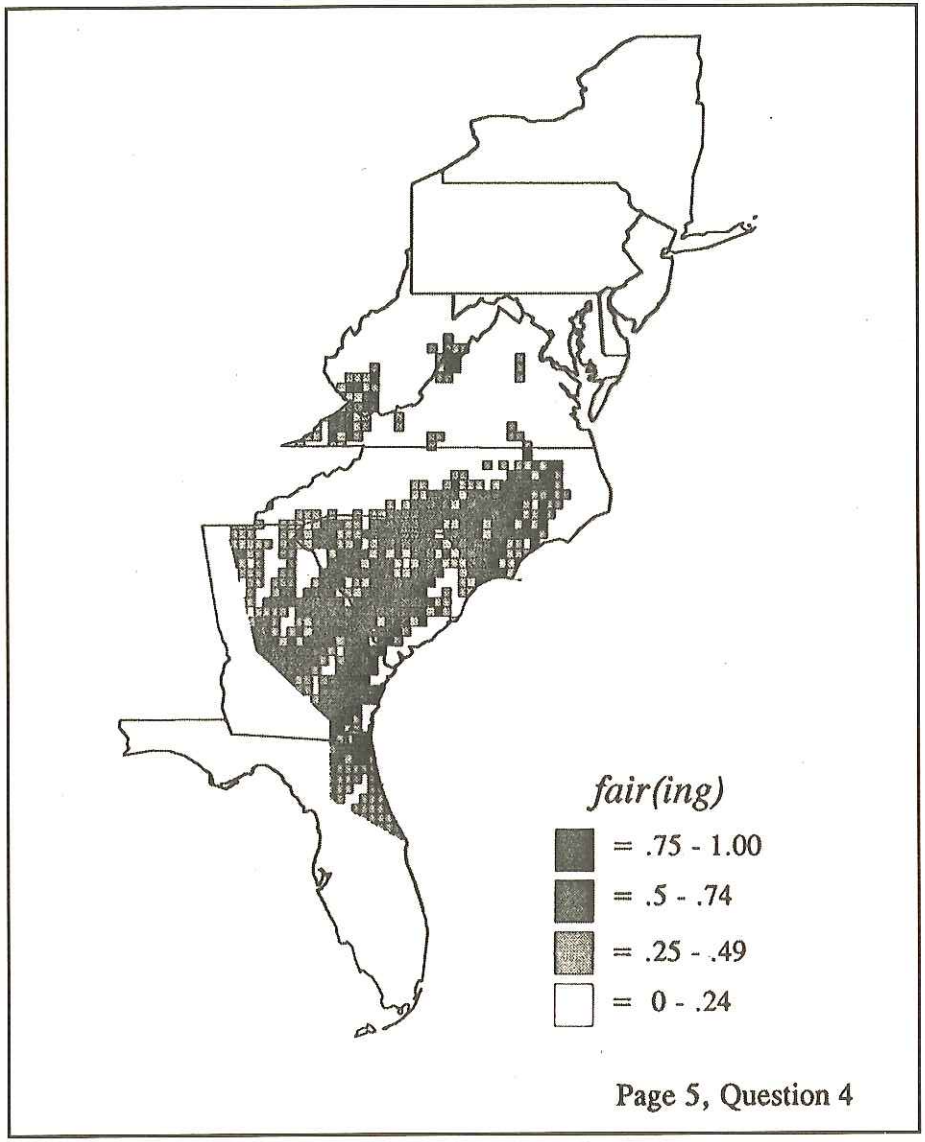


Figure 2.

concordance of social and linguistic facts projected across space and through time. (39)

Pederson then asserts that dialectologists in the Gilliéronian tradition, notably Hans Kurath in his widely-accepted analysis of the Eastern US into Northern, Midland, and Southern dialect regions, have attempted 'reorganization of evidence' to try to address 'the unreasonable expectations [placed upon] linguistic geography'. Such efforts create a set of generalizations, labeled regions which tend to take on a life of their own and obscure the probabilistic value of individual features. Figure 3 shows evidence about pronunciations of *half* and the low-front vowels that my wife noticed; here Kurath has substituted symbols for transcriptions, which makes it easier to get an idea of implicit probabilities, and in part of the region has used the size of the symbol to make a more definite statement of probability (Kurath and McDavid 1961:Map 14). Figure 4 is Kurath's generalized map of speech areas, but here the large and small lines offer no sense of probability; to draw and name a category, which then might be applied back to assessment of speech, actually loses the information that we need to make effective judgments based on linguistic features.

The public's expectations about dialects are not wrong or unmotivated. When non dialectologists map features onto regions as a result of their personal, individual experience, that relatively sporadic and limited experience must be generalized to yield a comprehensive mental map of possible language variation. My wife, for instance, had recognized the features that she heard from the waiter as part of her B[a]ston category, and she was pleased to be told that the waiter was from Massachusetts, not Boston but close enough. In another case of category assignment, I have been asked recently why the English of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina sounds distinctly Scottish! As I said before, we do the best we can with the experience we have available. Dennis Preston has shown us that our individual experience, taken collectively, is not so powerful as to yield a common set of dialect regions with sharp boundaries (1989) – but Preston's work also shows us that we do share some categories widely, such as our belief in a 'Southern' dialect (1993a), and that we all seem to maintain *some* categories even if not well-bounded and common ones. It seems reasonable to hypothesize that some regional variation is commonly perceived as so striking that most people can name it,

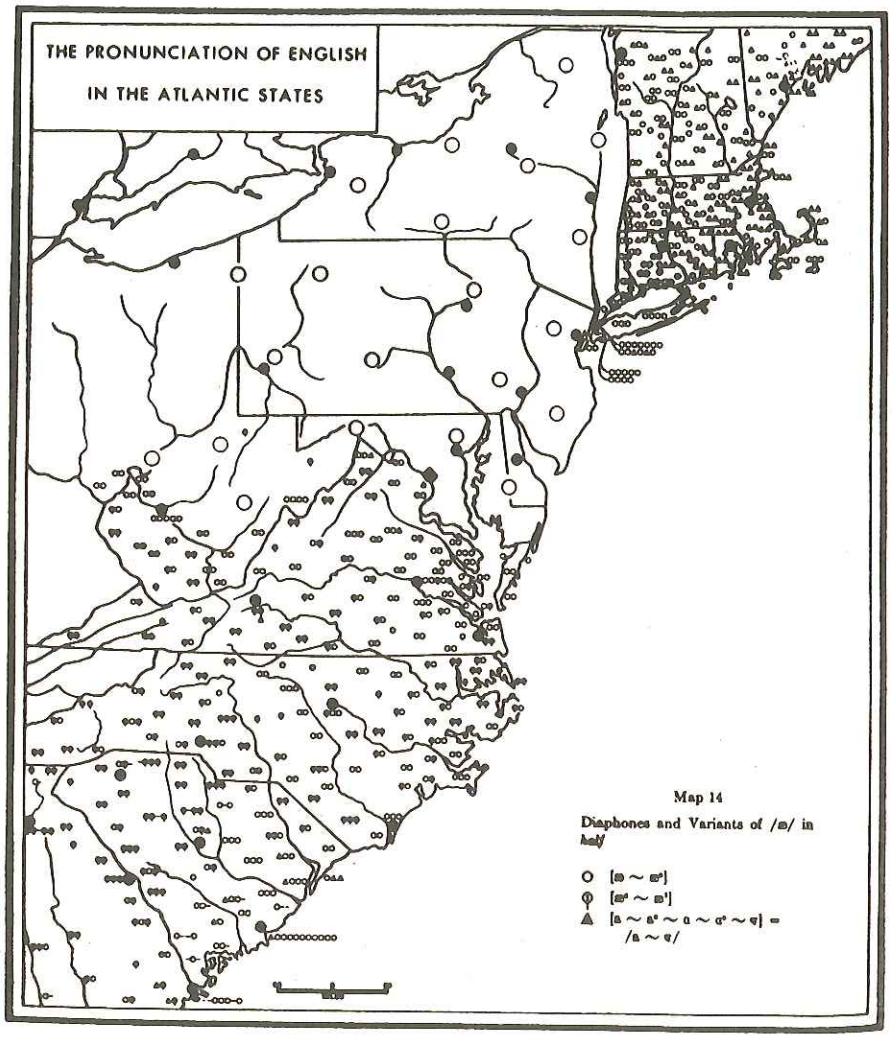
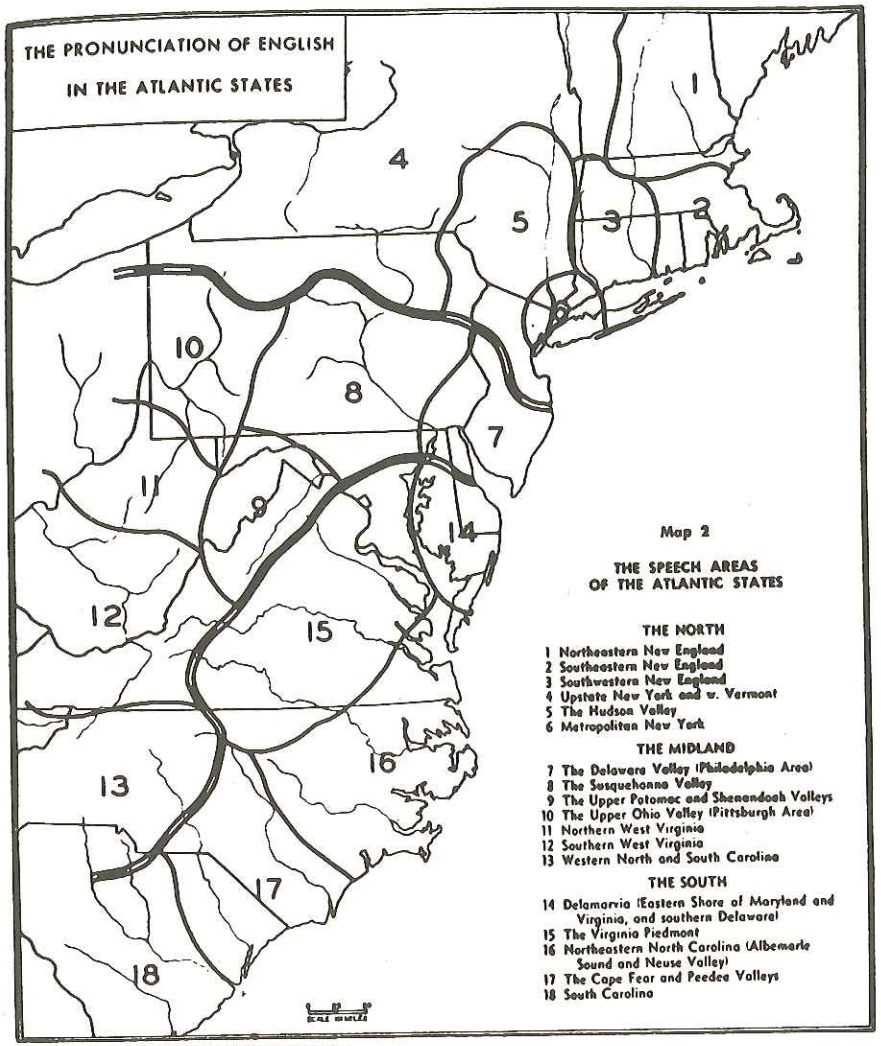


Figure 3.



From H. Kurath, A WORD GEOGRAPHY OF THE EASTERN STATES.

Figure 4.

such as 'Southern', although people may not assign the same boundaries to the region. The converse of this notion is that other dialect categories are *not* perceived as striking enough to maintain a common name, so that beyond a very few commonly-accepted areal designations we will find a great many categories with relatively weak linguistic justification. We could make such categories ourselves from scratch, but it seems clear to me that in practice we almost always attach linguistic features to categories defined with non-linguistic criteria. The number of non linguistic categories to which linguistic features might be mapped is quite literally unlimited – ethnic or cultural groups, education levels, or occupations, but also city, state, or other geographical names (see Preston 1989, 1993b for examples). The areal and cultural distance between Scotland and the Cherokees seems not to impede comparison of the categories, once they existed for the person who asked me about them, and neither has the fact that one category is areal and the other ethnic.

It is fair to ask whether there is anything about such categories that dialectologists can affirm. In general, I would say that the answer is no. The bases for perceptual categories are quite different from the documentary work of dialectology. Perceptual categories that emerge from the public are created in the absence of systematically collected evidence, as a way to compensate for gaps in experience, and they are highly likely to be influenced by non-linguistic factors. It is not unreasonable for dialectologists to make their own generalizations, as Kurath did from settlement history and as Pederson has from topography in the *Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States* Atlas (1986-92). Such generalizations can be compared to commonly-accepted labels like 'Southern', and readers can compare the areas drawn by dialectologists to their own categories in their own experience, but neither exercise of comparison really proves anything. Such work caters to the expectations of people who are used to making their own categories. The central fact about dialectology is that it does not require the creation of areal categories, because it offers systematic collection of evidence and is itself the remedy for the gaps in experience that cause individuals to use categories. Dialectology recapitulates our habitual behavior of matching linguistic features to places and other characteristics, and it can replace our ballpark generalizations about language with definite and comparable evidence; it can also remove or accurately replace the linguistic component that people tend to attach to non linguistic categories. If

used in this way, dialectology does not confirm, only modifies or rejects, existing perceptual categories.

Such has been the case since the beginnings of dialectology with Wenker and the Neogrammarians in Germany in the late nineteenth century. The Neogrammarian theoretical framework assumed the existence of separate and self-contained dialects, in which linguistic change, particularly sound change, operated with regularity. Dialectology, then, had the potential to demonstrate the truth of the assertions of Neogrammarian historical and comparative linguistics. When Wenker and his counterpart in France a few years later, Jules Gilliéron, found variation, not strict regularity, Gilliéron jumped ship and declared that 'each word has its own history'; the Neogrammarians continued to espouse the principle of regularity and to conduct historical and comparative inquiry as before while different linguists of that school attempted to account for the findings of dialectology within the theory. Labov's recent *Principles of Linguistic Change* (1994) is the most recent and extensive attempt at such a reconciliation. Other historical linguists, notably Nielsen 1989 for the Germanic languages and Stockwell and Minkova 1988 on the topic of the English Great Vowel Shift, have used dialect variation to caution against the danger of overgeneralizations in the creation of uniform dialect categories. Dialectology, therefore, is unlikely to fulfill the potential that the Neogrammarians saw in it, but it can nevertheless be crucial to accurate descriptions in historical and comparative linguistic studies in particular, and to an appropriate understanding of linguistic change more generally.

The field of inquiry that can address the notion of categories better than dialectology is sociolinguistics. The basic assumptions of sociolinguistics are quite different from those of dialectology. I have discussed this issue in more detail elsewhere (1994), but suffice it to say that, unlike dialectologists, sociolinguists believe in the existence of a vernacular in a speech community; they are interested in linguistic system, grammatical structure, where dialectologists are interested in features. Such a need to specify a speech community is exactly comparable to the creation of categories by individuals, and the methods of sociolinguistics are well suited to a determination of the nature and validity of such categories. As the name of the discipline suggests, the motivation for specification of speech communities has often been social in recent years; the beginnings of sociolinguistics, however, lie in the studies of towns in the Suisse

Romande, Charmey and Vionnaz, made by Gauchat and Gilliéron at the turn of the century (Kretzschmar 1994), and it is clear that geographic location might be used again today by sociolinguists as well as or in addition to race or social class. Sociolinguists are also interested, in Shana Poplack's terms, with 'explaining the apparent instability ... of linguistic form-function relations' (1993:258), which links it to current linguistic theory. Sociolinguistics run parallel to dialectology, and theory can be a part of both of them. Dialectologists have not been quick to address theory in recent years, but there is no reason that we should not do so and every reason to think that our findings might help to generate answers to theoretical questions.

So, the best answer to 'Why Dialectology?' is that it does better what we as individuals do all the time. It is an extension of a basic part of our process of communication. So far, however, our results have served more to educate us the dialectologists than they have to improve communication for the general public. We have not done as good a job as we might have done of telling the public what we have found out about regional and social variation in use of linguistic features. DARE is perhaps our most public direct expression, and it has sold fewer than 20,000 copies. Our results find their way, slowly, into dictionaries, but that is at best an indirect approach to the public. If it is true that the best rationale for dialectology is as I have argued, then its best expression should be to educate the public, to replace bad generalizations with accurate information. If good information about our various language can kick away one prop for otherwise non linguistic stereotyping, that would not be an undesirable achievement of dialectology.

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