

Paul K. Longmore

“Good English without Idiom or Tone”: The Colonial Origins of American Speech

Questions about shared language have played an important role in driving nationalism. European, Asian, and African nationalizing campaigns, facing obstacles of dialect and language diversity, all promoted, and sometimes tried to, enforce particular dialects or languages as national tongues. But in the colonial movement that became a quest for American independence, nationalists did not find it necessary to establish a unifying “national” tongue against competing dialects or languages. This distinctive feature of American Revolutionary nationalism and nation-building occurred because of the prior colonial experience. The societies that came to compose the new nation developed as extraterritorial settler colonies. Their social evolution influenced the linguistic evolution of colonial English speech. By the early to mid-eighteenth century, varieties of English emerged that many observers perceived as both homogeneous and matching metropolitan standard English. As a result, rather than having to foster or impose a unifying tongue, American Revolutionary nation builders focused on continuing to standardize the speech that had developed during the colonial era. North American British colonials possessed a *national* language well before they became “Americans.” This shared manner of speech inadvertently helped to prepare them for independent American nationhood.¹

This study offers not a linguistic analysis but a historical interpretation of Early American English that draws on historical lin-

Paul K. Longmore is Professor of History, San Francisco State University. He is the author of *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia, 2003); “‘They . . . speak better English than the English do’: Colonialism and the Origins of National Linguistic Standardization in America,” *Early American Literature*, XL (2005), 279–314.

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1 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 1991; orig. pub. 1983), 44; Joshua A. Fishman, *Language and Nationalism, Two Integrative Essays* (Rowley, Mass., 1972); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (New York, 1990), 51–63; Longmore, “‘They . . . speak better English than the English do’: Colonialism and the Origins of National Linguistic Standardization in America,” *Early American Literature*, XL (2005), 279–314; Marianne Cooley, “Emerging Standard and Subdialectal Variation in Early American English,” *Diachronica*, IX (1992), 180–184.

guistics and sociolinguistics, as well as Early American historiography and scholarship about nationalism. It examines the interplay between modes of speech and demographical, geographical, social, and political history. It explains the interaction of linguistic and historical processes in terms of the experience of these societies as settler colonies that eventually redefined themselves into an independent nation. The emergence of American varieties of English was first recognized two generations before the Revolution.

BRITISH DIALECTS, STANDARD METROPOLITAN ENGLISH, AND COLONIAL SPEECH In 1724, Hugh Jones, a professor at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, enlisted in the trans-Atlantic movement to reform English usage throughout the British Empire. His *An Accidence to the English Tongue* offered instruction in “the true Manner of *Reading, Writing, and Talking* proper *English*.” The multitude of dialects indicated a “crisis” in the language: “For wont of better Knowledge, and more Care, almost every County in *England* has gotten a distinct Dialect, or several peculiar Words, and odious Tones, perfectly ridiculous to Persons unaccustomed to hear such Jargon: Thus, as the Speech of a *Yorkshire* and *Somersetshire* downright *Countryman* would be almost unintelligible to each other; so would it be good Diversion to a polite *Londoner* to hear a Dialogue between them.” Noting that such differences in dialect appeared throughout England, Jones regarded them as evidence of linguistic “confusion” and, worse still, “abuses and corruptions” of the “mother tongue.” His critique reflected eighteenth-century language reformers’ view of English. In appraising local and regional dialects, prescriptivists took as their standard the written and spoken English of “polite” Londoners, the dialect of genteel people in the imperial metropolis.²

Interestingly, Jones declared that, in contrast to English provincials, many colonials spoke the language properly. In Virginia, “the planters, and even the native Negroes”—meaning African Americans—“generally talk good English without idiom or tone.” He claimed that only three types of people spoke “true

2 Hugh Jones, *An Accidence to the English Tongue* (Menston, England, 1967; orig. pub. London, 1724), 11–13, 21, 22.

English”—the aforementioned Londoners, “most . . . *Learned, Polite* and *Gentile People* every where, and the *Inhabitants* of the *Plantations* (even the Native Negroes).” In his appraisal, “idiom” referred to dialect vocabulary and colloquialism; “tone” meant dialect pronunciation and accents. In describing Anglophone colonials’ speech as “without idiom or tone,” he meant that, in linguistic terms, it *leveled* the marked differences of England’s various dialects, and by describing it as “good” and “true,” that it did not transplant the local and regional dialects that prescriptivists regarded as corruptions of “pure” English. He was not contending that colonial usage satisfied certain abstract objective criteria, but, culturally and historically more significant, that many colonials emulated the dialect promoted by language reformers as the standard for English everywhere. Against the charge that Jones’ claims were mere colonial boosterism, other commentators from the eighteenth century and later, many of them without any possible partisan motives, made the same observations.³

Notwithstanding this early testimony, these descriptions of colonial speech may seem counterintuitive and in need of grounding. Unfortunately, however, the relationship between linguistic history and early American social and political history has received little scholarly attention. Many historians hold a vague view of colonial English as somehow perpetuating Elizabethan English. Their unsophisticated version of what linguists call “colonial lag” presumes that this transplanted tongue, changing little over time, preserved the homeland language’s forms at the moment of colonization. But recent historical linguistic scholarship has modified the concept of “colonial lag,” emphasizing instead linguistic change through dialect mixing and leveling—the long-term elimination of the most marked differences among contributing dialects and the eventual formation of new varieties. Yet, just as historians have generally ignored historical linguistics, historical linguists have often shown inadequate, oversimplified, or outdated knowledge of early American history and historiography. Moreover, students of nationalism tend to study European, African, and Asian campaigns to foster national tongues but not the language

3 Jones (ed. Richard L. Morton), *The Present State of Virginia, From Whence Is Inferred A Short View of Maryland and North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 1956; orig. pub. London, 1724), 80; *idem*, *Accidence*, 14–15.

histories of the European settler colonies that became independent nations.⁴

Unlike contemporary languages and dialects, those from the past cannot be recorded and analyzed by modern linguists. Written records constitute the sole evidence. But extant documentary sources provide only limited information about vernacular colonial speech. They may not yield a body of diverse, quantifiable linguistic data adequate to reconstruct the evolving features of early American English, though they can deepen historians' understanding of early American social and political development.⁵

Sociolinguistic research into dialect mixing within immigrant societies can be of some benefit. Such studies indicate that when

4 Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1958), 271–284; David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York, 1989), 57–62, 256–264, 470–475, 652–655; Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1990); Michael P. Kramer, *Imaging Language in America, from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton, 1992); Jill Lepore, *A is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States* (New York, 2002); Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago, 1996); David Simpson, *The Politics of American English, 1776–1850* (New York, 1986). None of these scholars consults sociolinguistic scholarship. Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), examines the relationship between print language and the invention of the public sphere rather than the linguistic evolution of British North American English. Raymond Hickey, “Introduction,” in *idem* (ed.), *Legacies of Colonial English: Studies in Transported Dialects* (New York, 2004), 8–9; Gabriella Mazzon, “The Ideology of the Standard and the Development of Extraterritorial Englishes,” in Laura Wright (ed.), *The Development of Standard English 1300–1800: Theories, Descriptions, Conflicts* (New York, 2000), 75; Michael Montgomery, “British and Irish Antecedents,” in Algeo (ed.), *English in North America* (New York, 2001), 105–109; Edgar W. Schneider, “The English Dialect Heritage of the Southern United States,” in Hickey (ed.), *Legacies of Colonial English*, 262–309. Historical linguists' accounts of early American history are sometimes old-fashioned and almost mythic. For example, Hans Kurath, *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor, 1949), vi, 1–7, depicts colonial farming communities as “democratic” and “middle class” and colonial seaports as more European. Joey Lee Dillard asserts that American colonists had few books available and mistakenly identifies Alexis de Tocqueville as an eighteenth-century writer. Among the few historians that he cites are the early twentieth-century scholar Charles M. Andrews (*All-American English* [New York, 1975], 59, 63; *Toward a Social History of American English* [New York, 1985], 62, 52).

5 For historical linguists' assessment of the theoretical and methodological problems in gathering data, see Montgomery, “Was Colonial American English a *Koine*?” in Juhani Klemola, Merja Kytö, and Matti Rissanen (eds.), *Speech Past and Present: Studies in English Dialectology in Memory of Ossi Ihalainen* (New York, 1996), 213–235; *idem*, “British and Irish Antecedents,” 93–97, 101–104, 109–117, 153; Cooley, “Emerging Standard,” 167–187; Hickey, “Introduction,” 1–10; Kytö, “The Emergence of American English: Evidence from Seventeenth-Century Records in New England,” in Hickey (ed.), *Legacies of Colonial English*, 121–123, 132–133.

migrating dialect speakers of a common tongue come into contact in a new territory, complex long-term processes of leveling and simplification result in an unconscious selection of features from the original contributing dialects. The ultimate product may be a new compromise dialect called a *koine*.⁶

When read in light of sociolinguistic research, historical linguistic studies suggest that in Britain's North American colonies, the English language developed along lines characteristic of immigrant societies, particularly overseas settler colonies. The full array of British dialects mingled to form distinctly American varieties of English. Several regional *koines* probably evolved during the colonial era. The consensus from eighteenth-century observers to modern linguists is that whereas deep, geographically based, dialect differences marked early modern British speech, colonial English was significantly less differentiated. In Britain as a whole and even in England, dialects diverged so widely that speech from one county to another was often difficult to comprehend, but the colonies' regional varieties were mutually intelligible. Struck by this contrast, eighteenth-century observers described colonial speech as virtually dialect-free.⁷

Their further description of colonial English as pure and correct was most likely influenced not only by the natural propagation of London's "polite" speech and writing but also by colonials, especially in the elite and middling ranks, both consciously and unconsciously trying to accommodate their spoken and written language to that prestige dialect. This emulation of a metro-

6 The term *koine* comes from the Greek word for *common*; it referred to the *lingua franca* of the ancient Macedonian Empire.

7 Historical linguists now reject Dillard's argument in *All-American English* and *Toward a Social History of American English* that early American English was a continent-wide *koine*. Montgomery, "Was Colonial American English a *Koine*?" 230, is skeptical that colonial American English, in general, constituted a *koine* but concludes that *koineization* of some sort undoubtedly occurred. See also Fisher, "British and American, Continuity and Divergence," 60–61; Kytö, *Variation and Diachrony, With Early American English in Focus* (Frankfurt, 1991), 18–23; *idem*, "Emergence of American English," 126; Montgomery, "British and Irish Antecedents," 115. Two generations before sociolinguists developed *koineization* studies, Allen Walker Read, "British Recognition of American Speech in the Eighteenth Century," *Dialect Notes*, VI (1933), 325, wrote, "This absence of dialect, so puzzling to the commentators, is now accepted as normal to any colonial speech. In the jostling of speech characteristics imported from many regions, the peculiarities are very soon worn away and a state approaching homogeneity ensues."

politan linguistic standard seems to occur in many colonial settler societies.⁸

Additional distinctive factors in the colonial situation strengthened the linguistically and culturally dominant position of leveled English. Reigning as the language of imperial authority, law, commerce, and social prestige, it was also, therefore, the language of social mobility. Other European tongues that competed with it were at a distinct disadvantage. Over the long run, Dutch and German retreated into ethnocultural enclaves, and Swedish and Welsh virtually disappeared. All of these elements contributed to the development of leveled, mutually comprehensible American varieties of English.

DIALECT CONTACT IN EARLY MODERN BRITAIN AND SETTLER SOCIETIES Certain eighteenth-century language reformers who noted the severe differences among Britain's several languages and many English dialects contrasted this diversity with the apparent homogeneity of colonial English speech. In 1783, Beattie described four distinct languages—English, Welsh, Erse (Scottish Gaelic), and “Scotch” (also known as Scots, a variety of English sufficiently different from southern English to be considered by many a separate language). He also found that the various dialects of English within England diverged sharply. Writing six decades after Jones, he wrote, “The dialects of Lancashire and Yorkshire are hardly understood in London. Even in Kent, and in Berkshire, we hear words and sounds, that are not known in Middlesex.” In 1762, Sheridan, a popular lecturer and writer on proper English, anticipated Beattie and agreed with Jones: “Thus not only the Scotch, Irish, and Welsh, have each their own idioms, which uniformly prevail in those countries, but almost every county in England, has its peculiar dialect.”⁹

Eighteenth-century Britons, language reformers in particular, became more aware of this dialect diversity partly because increasing internal migration brought speakers of various dialects and

8 Cooley, “Emerging Standard,” offers a compelling examination of the interplay between the emergence of standard English and *koineization* in America.

9 James Beattie, “The Theory of Language,” *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (London, 1783), in Friedrich O. Wolf (ed.), *The Philosophical Works* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1970), III, 298; Thomas Sheridan, *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (New York, 1968; orig. pub. London, 1762), 30. See also Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (New York, 1992), 104–105.

tongues into contact. Those movements and interactions surely caused individuals, in linguistic terms, to accommodate their speech to new linguistic environments. For example, colonial newspaper advertisements for runaway Irish indentured servants described some who had resided in London as speaking “good English,” indicating that they had accommodated their speech to metropolitan standard English. Doubtless, many transplanting Anglophone Britons diverged from their native manner of speech to adopt some of the vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation of the places to which they relocated. These internal migrants probably practiced *situational code switching*, accommodating to the dialects of the new regions but resuming their native dialects whenever they returned to their original locales. Yet, although mobile Britons at the time individually adjusted their speech, major alterations do not appear to have occurred in the dialects to which they accommodated; nor did a compromise dialect emerge.¹⁰

Some long-term contact situations lead to leveling. Mingling of dialects may ultimately yield a koine. Regional koines incorporate but simplify elements from the contributing dialects, while maintaining structural continuity with the original, common linguistic system. Thus are koines and the other varieties mutually intelligible. “Koineization” is not inevitable though. Speakers develop koines, largely unconsciously, in response to historically specific, demographical, psychosocial, socioeconomic, cultural, or political circumstances that make dialect melding advantageous. But dialect contact can continue for many years without koineization. During the several centuries that the dialect of the elite and middling classes in London and the home counties became the standard of spoken and written English, as domestic migrants transplanted to the metropolis, the London variety absorbed elements of England’s local and regional dialects, but these piecemeal alterations did not constitute koineization. The evidence does not indicate that leveling or koineization occurred in early modern Britain.¹¹

10 Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, 29, n. 39; Barbara A. Fennell, *A History of English: A Sociolinguistic Approach* (Malden, Mass., 2001), 148–152, 154–156; Read, “The Assimilation of the Speech of British Immigrants in Colonial America,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, XXXVII (1938), 78.

11 This paragraph summarizes the theoretical models and research findings of important sociolinguistics studies of koineization: Surendar K. Gambhir, “Two Koines Compared: Guyanese Bhojapura and Calcutta Bazaar Hindustani,” *International Journal of Dravidian Linguistics*,

The linguistic and historical evidence suggests, however, that koineization probably did occur among British colonizers of North America. When speakers of regional and social dialects of a language come into contact in an environment outside their home territories, immigrant koines often arise. The need for linguistic, as well as social, solidarity within settler populations tends to promote a single speech community in the new geographical and social environment. The source dialects contribute the elements that ultimately are reconfigured as the settlers' common speech and primary language.¹²

Sociolinguists have documented koineization in many immigrant communities and societies—from the new industrial towns in Norway and Britain to Hindi-speaking communities in Fiji, Mauritius, and Guyana. Modern Israeli Hebrew is a prime example of an immigrant koine. Most pertinent in this context, linguists recount the emergence of koines in European colonial settler societies. Spanish koines appeared in Spain's Latin American possessions; British overseas colonists generated English koines in New Zealand and even in such vast territories as Canada and Australia. Historical linguists generally agree that koineization occurred, to some extent, in the British colonies that became the United States. When read in light of modern sociolinguistic research and recent historiography, the historical linguistic evidence for Early Ameri-

XII (1983), 471–472; Jeff Siegel, “Introduction: Controversies in the Study of *Koines* and *Koineization*,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, XCIX (1993), 5–6, 7–8; *idem*, “Review Article: Dialect Contact and *Koineization*,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, XCIX (1993), 116–118; *idem*, “*Koines* and *Koineization*,” *Language Sociology*, XIV (1985), 364–366; *idem*, “Mixing, Leveling, and Pidgin/Creole Development,” in Arthur K. Spears and Donald Winford (eds.), *The Structure and Status of Pidgins and Creoles* (Philadelphia, 1997), 126; Peter Trudgill, *Dialects in Contact* (New York, 1986), 95–98. J. David Burnley, “Sources of Standardisation in Later Middle English,” in Joseph B. Trahern, Jr. (ed.), *Standardizing English: Essays in the History of Language Change* (Knoxville, 1989), 23–41; Joseph M. Williams, *Origins of the English Language: A Social and Linguistic History* (New York, 1975), 86, 92–94; John H. Fisher, *The Emergence of Standard English* (Lexington, 1996), 145–156.

12 See Siegel, “Introduction: Controversies,” 6–8; *idem*, “*Koines* and *Koineization*,” 362–364, 370–375; *idem*, “Mixing, Leveling, and Pidgin/Creole Development,” 126–129; *idem*, “Review Article,” 116–118; Nicole Domingue, “Internal Change in a Transplanted Language,” *Studies in the Linguistic Sciences*, IV (1981), 151; Haim Blanc, “The Israeli *Koine* as an Emergent National Standard,” in Joshua A. Fishman, Charles A. Ferguson, and Jyotirindra Das Gupta (eds.), *Language Problems of Developing Nations* (New York, 1968), 237–251; Gambhir, “Two *Koines* Compared”; Trudgill, *Dialects in Contact*, 95–126; *idem*, Elizabeth Gordon, and Gillian Lewis, “Determinism in New-Dialect Formation and the Genesis of New Zealand English,” *Journal of Linguistics*, XXXVI (2000), 299–318.

can English suggests the likelihood of a long-term process of dialect mixing, leveling, and simplification leading to regional koineization.¹³

DIALECT MIXING IN BRITAIN'S NORTH AMERICAN COLONIES Much of the historical linguistic research traces American speech back to England's regional dialects, but it has not found that migrating Anglophones transplanted any particular English dialect intact. Instead, it shows extensive mixing of English dialects within the colonies. This scholarship describes patterns similar to sociolinguists' findings regarding dialect mixing among transplanted dialect speakers of a common tongue.¹⁴

During the first phase of settlement, because immigrants use their various dialects concurrently, speech exhibits diffuseness—that is, fluctuation and inconsistency in, for example,

13 On koineization in Norway, see Trudgill, *Dialects in Contact*, 99–102, 143–148; in England, Paul Kerswill and Ann Williams, “Creating a New Town Koine: Children and Language Change in Milton Keynes,” *Language in Society*, XXIX (2000), 65–115; in Fiji, Guyana, and Mauritius, Gambhir, “Two Koinés Compared”; Siegel, “*Koinés and Koineization*,” 364; *idem*, “Review Article,” 117; in Israel, Blanc, “Israeli Koine”; Siegel, “*Koinés and Koineization*,” 364; in Latin America, Margarita Hidalgo, “One Century of Study in New World Spanish,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, CXLIX (2001), 9–32; in New Zealand, Trudgill et al., “Determinism”; in Australia and Canada, Sydney J. Baker, *The Australian Language* (Sydney, 1966), 452–456; John Bernard and Arthur Delbridge, *Introduction to Linguistics: An Australian Perspective* (Sydney, 1980), 270–285; Trudgill, *Dialects in Contact*, 143, 145–146.

14 For specific studies, see Henry Alexander, “Early American Pronunciation and Syntax,” *American Speech*, I (1925), 141–148; *idem*, “The Language of the Salem Witchcraft Trials,” *ibid.*, III (1928), 390–400; Kurath, “The Origin of Dialectal Differences in Spoken American English,” *Modern Philology*, XXV (1928), 385–395; *idem*, “English Sources of Some American Regional Words and Verb Forms,” *American Speech*, XLIV (1969), 60–68; Kytö, *Variation and Diachrony*; Anders Orbeck, *Early New England Pronunciation, as Reflected in some Seventeenth Century Town Records of Eastern Massachusetts* (Ann Arbor, 1927); Cooley, “Emerging Standard,” 170–171; Ann Louise Frisinger Sen, “Dialect Variation in Early American English,” *Journal of English Linguistics*, VIII (1974), 41–47. For general conclusions about dialect mixing, see Algeo, “External History,” in *idem* (ed.), *English in North America*, 14–15; Cooley, “Emerging Standard,” 168, 170–171, 178; Dillard, *All-American English*, 50, 55; *idem*, *Toward a Social History of American English*, 50–51; Fennell, *History of English*, 210–213; Guy Jean Fougue, “American English at the Time of the Revolution,” in Harold B. Allen and Michael D. Linn (eds.), *Dialect and Language Variation* (Berkeley, 1986), 514; Kurath, *Word Geography*; Kytö, *Variation and Diachrony*, 18–23; Albert H. Marckwardt (rev. Dillard), *American English* (New York, 1980), 70, 89; Thomas Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language* (New York, 1964), 222–223; Montgomery, “British and Irish Antecedents,” 121; Randolph Quirk, *The English Language and Images of Matter* (London, 1972), 4–7; Read, “Assimilation of the Speech of British Immigrants,” 79; *idem*, “British Recognition of American Speech,” 325.

15 Quotation from Siegel, “Mixing, Leveling, and Pidgin/Creole Development,” 126. See

grammar and pronunciation, vocabulary and phraseology. For several generations, the enormous “reservoir of linguistic variants” from the contributing dialects shrinks to “fewer and more regular forms.” Through a slow and complicated process of leveling and simplification, marked differences are eliminated, irregularities are reduced, and a compromise common usage is established. Some elements are selected for formal and some for informal use. Others are assigned neutral status or discarded altogether. Some variants from regional dialects may survive through reallocation as, for instance, social-class or stylistic variants. Over three or more generations, these unplanned and unconscious processes focus or stabilize the language and may nativize it as a primary tongue. More recent immigrants, imitating native speakers as a matter of course, take natives’ speech ways as their model.¹⁵

The linguistic evidence for early American English is far less extensive than the data used in modern sociolinguistic studies. This scant evidence and contemporary commentaries suggest a complex linguistic situation involving both ongoing variation and diversity and long-term processes of koineization. In general, the research points toward patterns similar to the sociolinguistic model outlined above. In several regions colonized during the seventeenth century—New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the Chesapeake—colonial English speech appears to have been initially diffuse. Variation and diversity continued throughout the eighteenth century, particularly within isolated local speech communities, as well as within individual speech styles and style shifting. Nonetheless, several generations of American-born Anglophone colonials dwelling in the regions that would become the core of the new nation gradually selected or reallocated elements from England’s dialects as they unconsciously fashioned new North American varieties of English.¹⁶

Fischer’s *Albion’s Seed*, one of the few historical studies to draw on historical linguistic scholarship and evidence, implicitly supports this sociolinguistic interpretation. Critics charge him

Siegel, “Introduction: Controversies,” 6–8; *idem*, “Koinés and Koineization,” 362–364, 370–375; *idem*, “Review Article,” 116–118; *idem*, “Mixing, Leveling, and Pidgin/Creole Development,” 126–129; Domingue, “Internal Change,” 151; Blanc, “Israeli Koine”; Gambhir, “Two Koinés Compared”; Trudgill, *Dialects in Contact*, 95–126; *idem* et al., “Determinism.”

16 Cooley, “Emerging Standard,” 168–179; Kytö, “Emergence of American English,” 121, 124–126; Montgomery, “British and Irish Antecedents,” 116–117, 120–151.

17 Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 57–62, 256–264, 470–475, 652–655; Jack P. Greene et al., with a

with overstating the influence of particular English regions as sources of American regional cultures, but, at least regarding speech ways, his analysis is more careful and complex than they recognize. Although he focuses mainly on the English roots of American speech, he judiciously describes a complicated process of linguistic modification. Although he does not draw on sociolinguistic scholarship on how transplanted languages change in new geographical and social environments, his analysis suggests a sociolinguistic process of dialect mixing, leveling, simplification, and regional koineization. His strongest evidence pointing toward dialect mixing is demographical.¹⁷

Fischer's examination of first-wave New England settlers' regional origins suggests extensive dialect contact. Some 60 percent of male Puritans in the Great Migration of 1629 to 1640 hailed from a nine-county region in the eastern part of England, but "a large minority," 40 percent, emigrated from the remaining thirty-four English counties. More than 25 percent came from the south and west, nearly 10 percent from the Midlands and north. Easterners predominated in Massachusetts as a whole, composing the majority of men in many towns. For example, the men of Salem and Ipswich, Essex County's largest and most prosperous towns, were overwhelmingly East Anglians. But some towns reflected more diverse origins. Southerners and westerners slightly exceeded easterners in Sudbury; almost 67 percent of Dorchester's male founders transplanted from the south and west; and more than 90 percent of Gloucester's men came from that same region. Outside Massachusetts, New Haven's early settlers included many Londoners, whereas New Hampshire and Maine drew large numbers of West Countrymen. The West Country was also "an important secondary" source of migrants to Massachusetts, but many of these migrants soon moved "west to Connecticut, or south to Nantucket, or north to Maine." Fischer concludes that "diversity

reply by Fischer, "Forum: *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*—A Symposium," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XLVIII (1991), 226–309. Some historical linguists seem generally to accept Fischer's historical interpretation. Algeo, "External History," 7–8, 10; Fisher, "British and American, Continuity and Divergence," in Algeo (ed.), *English in North America*, 59–61. For a critical examination that questions Fischer's handling of linguistic sources and data but finds his use of demographical evidence persuasive, see Montgomery, "British and Irish Antecedents," 114.

18 Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 31–36; *idem*, "Forum," 264–271, 277.

of regional origins became a major factor in the founding of other New England colonies.”¹⁸

Attributing the major influence on New England speech to first-wave immigrants who transplanted from eastern England to eastern Massachusetts, Fischer describes complicated dialect mixing. He explains that New England speech evolved not through simple replication but complex derivation. Eastern England’s speech was not a homogeneous dialect but a family of related dialects. When “these English speech ways” crossed the Atlantic, “they mixed with one another and merged with other elements,” that is, with other English dialects. In other words, from the outset, contact among members of the initial in-migrating generation began to generate dialect mixing. From a linguistic standpoint, it is important that the founding generation was followed by two generations of American-born colonials but relatively few additional immigrants. Those three seventeenth-century generations began to produce a new variety of English that derived but diverged from the founders’ many native dialects.¹⁹

Fischer finds similar patterns in the late seventeenth-century upper Delaware Valley. He notes that many founding-generation Quakers transplanted from England’s North Midlands but many other early colonizers came from the vicinity of London; every English locality sent emigrants to the Delaware Valley. He explains too that English North Midlands speech was “a linguistic hybrid which had evolved through many centuries from a mixture of British and Scandinavian tongues.” He pinpoints that dialect as chiefly influencing “American Midland” speech, though he does not identify it as the only source. Eventually, in the upper Delaware Valley, “the rough edges of North Midland speech were rubbed off by constant friction with dialects from other parts of England.” As a case in point, “the broad northern *come* (pronounced *coom*) did not survive in Pennsylvania after the mid-eighteenth century. But less obtrusive North Midland vowels became standard in the Delaware Valley and still survive there to this day.” English dialect speakers gave up idiosyncratic regional pronunciations, such as *coom*, and retained or adopted “less obtrusive” pronunciations, that is, those occurring more frequently across a

19 *Idem*, *Albion’s Seed*, 57–62; *idem*, “Forum,” 275, 277.

20 *Idem*, *Albion’s Seed*, 438–445, 470–475. See also Montgomery, “Solving Kurath’s Puzzle:

range of dialects. Fischer concludes that though English North Midlands speech was the most influential source, American Midland speech developed, not from one source dialect, “but from a complex process of mixing and merging” of English dialects.²⁰

Fischer’s analysis of Virginia speech again describes complex dialect mixing, leveling, and simplification. The early settlers came from every part of England, but a great majority hailed from the sixteen southern and western counties. As with England’s eastern and North Midlands regions, southern and western English modes of speech “were not monolithic, but comprised a complex family of local dialects.” For example, “a Sussex countryman commonly dropped his *h*’s, but neighboring counties tended to sound that consonant clearly.” “Somerset folk had a way of turning *s* into *z*, and *o* into *u*, so that their county name became *Zumerzet*.” Meanwhile, inhabitants of Berkeley Hundred in Gloucestershire preserved many old Saxon words and pronunciations. “*This* and *that* became *thicke* and *thucke*” (or, rather, *thicke* and *thucke* remained the local equivalents of *this* and *that*). He concludes that “the creation of the Virginia speech way was a cultural process of high complexity.” “The Virginia dialect as it developed through the years was not merely a simple replication” of southern and western English speech. Drawing from, not only those dialects but also the speech of other regions—particularly London—as well as the admixture of African and African-American speech, “the transfer of language” to Virginia “was a dynamic process of linguistic selection and recombination.”²¹

In examining how English dialects interacted and changed in early Virginia, Fischer discerns “an important clue to the dynamics of language transmission, and to the complex process” of language evolution. “Most of Berkeley Hundred’s special speech ways did not survive in Virginia, despite the fact that so many inhabitants migrated there.” Likewise, “the dropped *h* of Sussex and the hard *s* of Somerset did not take root in Virginia.” Yet because “most countrymen throughout the south and west of England said *Ah be* for *I am*,” “that usage became an important part of the Vir-

Establishing the Antecedents of the American Midland Dialect Region,” in Hickey (ed.), *Legacies of Colonial English*, 310–325; *idem*, “British and Irish Antecedents,” 124–125, 133–136.

21 Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 236–240, 256–262, 264; *idem*, “Forum,” 278–281, 283; Montgomery, “British and Irish Antecedents,” 125–132.

22 Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 262–263.

ginia accent.” This finding, declares Fischer, points to the “manner” in which “a new speech way was manufactured out of old materials.” “From a mixed family of dialects in southern and western England, local peculiarities tended to disappear and general characteristics survived.” In other words, dialect mixing eventuated in leveling and simplification. Sociolinguists have documented this process as occurring often in immigrant societies where dialects of a common tongue come into contact.²²

Fischer’s analysis points to a major question about how transplanted languages change. Which words, pronunciations, and forms contribute to the formation of a compromise dialect, which are discarded, and why? Some sociolinguists believe that variants found in the majority of contributing dialects are those most likely to be retained. Others argue either that the variants used by the largest number of individual speakers become part of a koine or that demographical, social, cultural, occupational, and political factors—the social traits and status of various speakers and groups—outweigh linguistic factors in determining which elements compose a koine. Even in the modern language environments from which linguists can gather data as languages evolve, a multiplicity of contributing factors complicates analysis. Scholars may never be able to develop detailed evidence for colonial America, but extrapolations from modern sociolinguistic research are possible. Though Fischer does not refer to such scholarship, he describes patterns that match sociolinguists’ models of the processes that lead to immigrant koineization. Careful consideration of both the surviving evidence and historical linguistic and sociolinguistic research supports the view that Anglophone colonials engaged in complex dialect mixing, which resulted in leveling, simplification, and production of regional varieties of English.²³

THE IMPACT OF DEMOGRAPHY AND MOBILITY ON EARLY AMERICAN SPEECH WAYS If nonlinguistic factors play an important, even a

23 Kerswill and Williams, “Creating a New Town Koine,” 70, 85, 89, 90, 92; Siegel, “Review Article,” 107, 110, 115, 117–118; Trudgill, *Dialects in Contact*, 98. Montgomery and Kytö conclude that, given the absence of adequate documentary evidence of colonial speech, scholars are justified in assuming, under the uniformitarian principle, that the factors affecting language development in the past are similar to those in the present (Montgomery, “Was Colonial American English a Koine?” 232; Kytö, “Emergence of American English,” 126).

24 Trudgill, *Dialects in Contact*, 95–98 (95); *idem*, “A Window on the Past: ‘Colonial Lag’

determinative, role in linguistic change, what elements beyond the mingling of English dialect speakers helped to shape colonial American English? What historically specific demographical and social circumstances influenced the re-patterning of pronunciation and vocabulary?

Because Fischer is most interested in origins and retentions, he stresses the contributions from the first settlers' homeland dialects. But corollary to that approach and corroborating other important aspects of Fischer's analysis, sociolinguists studying linguistic change in immigrant speech communities focus on the key role of immigrants' children and grandchildren. All speakers affect the evolution of language but in different ways. In-migrating adults accommodate to the dialects that they encounter even as they remain oriented toward their home regions' dialects. Their children and, especially, their grandchildren experience the diminishing repertoire of variants available from the dialects in contact, as well as the emerging compromise dialect. They contribute most heavily to the development of a compromise dialect. Second- and third-generation native-born speakers are central to the linguistic focusing that leads to a stable idiom. These are the generations during which koines first appear. Hence, the percentage of children arriving with or born to an immigrant generation, the rates at which subsequent generations reproduce, the rate and volume of later immigration, and the proportion of immigrants during the second and third generations all shape dialect mixing and koineization. Birth, death, and immigration rates can accelerate or retard leveling and the emergence and stabilization of a new dialect. Of particular importance is the extent of geographical mobility leading to social interaction among speakers. Koineization typically takes at least three generations by which point native-born speakers are often communicating in "a relatively unified and distinctive dialect."²⁴

These sorts of social and demographical elements undoubtedly shaped colonial English. Though colonials everywhere bore offspring, demographical experience varied by region. From the

and New Zealand Evidence for the Phonology of Nineteenth-Century English," *American Speech*, LXXIV (1999), 227–239; *idem* et al., "Determinism," 302–311; Kerswill and Williams, "Creating a New Town Koine," 68–70, 89, 90, 95, 101, 102; Siegel, "Mixing, Leveling, and Pidgin/Creole Development," 128–129.

25 John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789*

outset, New England and Mid-Atlantic settlers replaced themselves by natural means. Within half a century, second- and third-generation native-born colonials outnumbered the founding immigrant generations as well as later-arriving immigrants. But reproduction alone does not direct linguistic change. Seventeenth-century New Englanders tended not to move out of the relatively self-contained towns. Isolation probably made the first two generations' speech comparatively diffuse. The descendants in the third generation, who lived during the transitional decades surrounding 1700, and those in the fourth generation, were more mobile, geographically and socially, thus increasing social and commercial interaction and likely accelerating linguistic leveling.²⁵

Mid-Atlantic Anglophone colonials were, from the start, more mobile, more connected to commercial networks, and more involved with a demographically diverse population across a wider area. Those factors may have accelerated dialect leveling. In contrast, seventeenth-century Chesapeake colonials achieved population stability only after several generations. Lower birth rates and higher infant and child death rates, along with skewed sex ratios and the dependency of population growth on continued immigration, kept the ratio of American-born to immigrant speakers much lower there during the seventeenth century than in the northern regions. These demographical factors may have made Chesapeake English speech diffuse and unfocused for a longer time.²⁶

(Chapel Hill, 1985), 217–219, 226–227, 229, 235; Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, 1970), 22–37, 39–40, 104–120, 123, 125–130, 155–171, 176–196, 211–214, 270–271; Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years, Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636–1736* (New York, 1970), 65–68, 146; Gary B. Nash, “Social Development,” in Greene and J. R. Pole (eds.), *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore, 1984), 237, 243; Jim Potter, “Demographical Development and Family Structure,” in *ibid.*, 123–156; Kytö, “Emergence of American English,” 132.

26 Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America* (New York, 1988), 96–99; James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (New York, 1976; orig. pub. 1972), 10, 13, 71–77; Stephanie Grauman Wolf, *Urban Village: Population, Community, and Family Structure in German Town, Pennsylvania 1683–1800* (Princeton, 1976), 12–14, 71–81, 94–95, 110–112, 127–153, 332; McCusker and Menard, *Economy of British America*, 207–208, 229; Nash, “Social Development,” 238–241, 243–244; Potter, “Demographical Development, 142–144; Allan Kulikoff, “The Colonial Chesapeake: Seedbed of Antebellum Southern Culture?” *Journal of Southern History*, XL (1979), 520–521, 537; *idem*, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill, 1986), 32–34, 49–61; McCusker and Menard, *Economy of British America*, 217–

Some observers attributed the emergence of the regional varieties in American English to other social conditions besides demographical ones. John Witherspoon, a Scottish immigrant who became president of the College of New Jersey and signed the Declaration of Independence, expressed a common opinion that “being much more unsettled, and moving frequently from place to place,” Americans were “not so liable to local peculiarities either of accent or phraseology.” The citizens of his adopted country certainly had an urge to move. Many of them settled somewhere, only later to pull up stakes and go somewhere else. Internal migration threw together speakers of the full array of English dialects. Historical linguists have long held that, beginning in the colonial era and throughout American history, geographical mobility had a leveling influence on American speech. But in early modern Britain, geographical mobility generated dialect contact without leading to dialect leveling and simplification. Consequently, linguists conclude that physical relocation by itself does not inevitably produce dialect melding. The contact among dialects generated by migration is only a potential first step in a complex process of linguistic change.²⁷

COLONIAL INDUCEMENTS TO ALTER SPEECH PATTERNS Large-scale linguistic change occurs through myriad small-scale speech events, countless encounters between individuals who unconsciously adjust their speech styles to one another. Social psychologists lend to sociolinguistics a paradigm of such interactions called speech-accommodation theory. It examines the psychosocial factors behind individual style shifting, as well as some of its social consequences. It tries to explain the motivations that lead to speech

220, 227–228; Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman, *A Place in Time: Middlesex County, Virginia, 1650–1750* (New York, 1984), 114, 236–240.

27 John Witherspoon, *The Druid* [1781], in *The Miscellaneous Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon* (Philadelphia, 1803), 181, 191; Bailyn, *Peopling*, 49–86; Jessica Cross, *The Evolution of an American Town: Newtown, New York, 1642–1775* (Philadelphia, 1983), 31–33, 110–111; Greven, *Four Generations*, 39–40, 125–130, 155–171, 211–214, 270–271; Lemon, *Best Poor Man’s Country*, 71–77; Lockridge, *New England Town*, 146; McCusker and Menard, *Economy of British America*, 138, 142–143, 207–208; Wolf, *Urban Village*, 71–81, 94–95, 110–112, 332; Boorstin, *Americans*, 271–273; Marckwardt and Dillard, *American English*, 70, 89; Thomas Pyles, *Words and Ways of American English* (New York, 1952), 72; Quirk, *English Language*, 4. On geographical mobility and language change, see Hickey, “Introduction,” 20.

28 Leslie M. Beebe and Howard Giles, “Speech-Accommodation Theories: A Discussion

convergence—adaptation by interacting individuals to one another’s speech—and speech divergence—speakers’ accentuation of differences. Speech-accommodation theory posits that individuals are motivated toward convergence to attain one or more of three goals—efficiency in communication, social approval, and positive social identity. Another possible distinct motivating factor that the theory recognizes is the pursuit of material interests in the form of occupational mobility or economic gain. Among the elements determining the magnitude of linguistic convergence are environmental conditions “that may increase the need for social approval and/or high communicational efficiency.” This recognition of environmental factors makes room for the influence of such material interests.²⁸

Both the motivating goals and the conditions that shape linguistic convergence were present in the colonies. At least one eighteenth-century commentator, foreshadowing those ideas, recognized that not just geographical movement but also social interaction prompted Anglophone colonials to drop “the peculiarities of their several provincial idioms, retaining only what was fundamental and common to them all.” “Intercourse and intermarriages” fostered what later linguists would call speech accommodation. Geographical mobility jumbled Anglophones within the American landscape.²⁹

More pertinent to the present point, colonials organized a collective way of life oriented toward both settlement and resettlement. At every stage of internal migration, they had to adjust and adapt, meaning that they had to communicate with one another and accommodate their speech. Colonial life became increasingly mobile physically and fluid socially. Colonizers needed viable working communities, comprising a wide range of individuals and social groups, to contest indigenous peoples and imperial rivals for territory and resources. Accomplishing such geopolitical goals also required the motivation of material, psychic, and social rewards. Colonization facilitated individual and familial quests for greater wealth and higher status. These factors certainly prompted indi-

in Terms of Second-Language Acquisition,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, XLVI (Amsterdam, 1984), 5–32.

29 “Advertisement of an English Friend,” in David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution* (London, 1793), II, v.

viduals to accommodate their speech styles to one another, as well as toward standard English.³⁰

The imperatives and motivations that spurred colonization affected the transfer of speech in yet another way. Because English speech marked social station, the general absence of upper-class Britons from transatlantic migration inhibited direct transplantation of elite social dialects. As a result, individuals in every colonial region and, more to the point, all social ranks employed speech forms that Britons of higher status thought vulgar. For example, many colonials pronounced *cover* as *kivver*, *engine* as *ingine*, *yesterday* as *yisterday*, *yes* as *yis*, and *Sarah* as *Sary*. In Britain, these pronunciations marked lower social status; in America, they became stylistic variants among individuals of every rank and region, not simply indicators of class. The inability of colonial speech to replicate the full range of idioms that registered the British social hierarchy was another form of leveling.³¹

Immigration to colonial British America generated new ethnocultural patterns that influenced American speech ways. Apart from the settlers of New Netherlands, the tiny Swedish settlements on the Delaware, and some Welsh migrants, seventeenth-century colonizers were overwhelmingly English. As a result, several generations of Anglophone colonials in many places developed leveled and increasingly identifiable American speech before the arrival of speakers of Scots, the Scottish variety of English, or any continental European language. Not until the eighteenth century, especially after 1720, did large numbers of immigrants arrive from all parts of the British Isles—Scotland and Ireland as well as England and Wales—and from Europe, introducing an even greater range of dialects and tongues. But these new arrivals came into colonies that had been forming distinctive ways of speaking for two to five generations. Their impact on mid-Atlantic colonial English speech came only in the form of regional variations, not radical and difficult-to-comprehend dialect differences.

By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, these later im-

30 Cross, *Evolution*, 31–33, 110–111; Eric Richards, “Scotland and the Uses of the Atlantic Empire,” in Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 96–97.

31 Dillard, *All-American English*, 54; *idem*, *Toward a Social History of American English*, 57–58; Kurath, *Word Geography*, 4, 7; Sen, “Dialect Variation,” 41–47.

32 On English linguistic dominance, see Sally Schwartz, “*A Mixed Multitude*”: *The Struggle*

migrants either abandoned their native tongues and completely assimilated to English (Swedes, Welsh, and many Dutch) or practiced situational code switching, using their native tongues in ethnocultural enclaves and speaking English in the wider world (Dutch and Germans). In a sense, both British regional-dialect speakers and immigrants who spoke other languages faced the same linguistic situation. They all had to accommodate to the established and dominant speech of Anglophone native speakers, the North American varieties of English. Moreover, elite and middling colonials increasingly sought to merge this speech with the standard English of the imperial metropolis—the language of governance and business for all colonials regardless of ethnocultural or linguistic background, as well as a means of social mobility and a marker of social status. Non-Anglophone colonials who wished to rise had to switch codes in particular situations or assimilate completely to the dominant varieties.³²

By the 1720s, the bulk of white inhabitants along most of the Atlantic seaboard were no longer immigrants speaking a myriad of English dialects. Most were now natives who probably spoke leveled colonial forms of English. Regional varieties that derived from the varying mixtures of dialect speakers had probably emerged, but the differences among them were, literally, not so pronounced as the divergences among homeland British dialects. Many colonials were likely using several, mutually intelligible, re-

for Toleration in Colonial Pennsylvania (New York, 1987), 80, 86, 88–90; on Dutch, Randall H. Balmer, *A Perfect Babel of Confusion: Dutch Religion and English Culture in the Middle Colonies* (New York, 1989), 29, 72–73, 89, 100, 117–119, 120–121, 129–130, 139, 141–144, 152–153, 225, n. 36; Cross, *Evolution*, 143–144, 163, 172, 257–258, 271; Donna Merwick, *Death of a Notary: Conquest and Change in Colonial New York* (Ithaca, 1999), 152, 154–155, 171–172, 182, 236, 238; A.Gregg Roeber, “‘The Origin of Whatever Is Not English among Us’: The Dutch-speaking and the German-speaking Peoples of Colonial British America,” in Bailyn and Morgan (eds.), 221, 223–236; Alexander J. Wall, “The Controversy in the Dutch Church in New York Concerning Preaching in English,” *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, XII (1938), 39–58; on German, Roeber, “Origin,” 221, 244–282; Schwartz, “*Mixed Multitude*,” 7–8, 25–26, 73, 79, 131, 145–146, 148, 150, 185–193, 216, 231–232, 235, 244, 251–253, 263, 289, 293, 360, n. 232; Wolf, *Urban Village*, 138–153; on Swedish, Schwartz, “*Mixed Multitude*,” 69–73, 78–79, 99–100, 108–109, 293; on Welsh, Boyd Schlenker, “‘The English is Swallowing Up Their Language’: Welsh Ethnic Ambivalence in Colonial Pennsylvania and the Experience of David Evans,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, CXIV (1990), 201–228; Schwartz, “*Mixed Multitude*,” 25, 77–78, 79, 109–110, 293; on “the founder principle,” the important role of founding generations in language formation, see Hickey, “Introduction,” 12–13; on Scotch and Irish influences on American Midland speech, Montgomery, “Solving Kurath’s Puzzle”; *idem*, “British and Irish Antecedents,” 133–136.

gional koines. Moreover, whereas the first settlements were a broken chain, the colonies after 1670 stretched continuously along the seaboard. As a result, from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century, intercolonial migration may have woven the several earlier regional processes of leveling into a more extensive continental process. This expansion did not generate an American continental koine but may have helped to make the several regional varieties more comprehensible to one another.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DESCRIPTIONS OF AMERICAN ENGLISH Such were the developments that Jones and other commentators described to British readers. Their accounts first appeared in the 1720s and continued into the nineteenth century. Some historical linguists have raised important questions about their value as sources of linguistic data, but, despite their limitations, these data can yield useful evidence.

The range of observers is noteworthy. Many made “tours” of North America, but they were not mere tourists in the modern sense. “Tours” could extend from a few months to several years. In addition, books titled “Tours” or “Travels” could be much more than impressionistic descriptions of a place. They were often forerunners of modern, first-person ethnographic reports. Moreover, the most valuable descriptions did not come from travelers but from observers who stayed in the colonies for a longer time. Among them, William Eddis and Jonathan Boucher eventually returned to England, but Eddis was secretary to Maryland’s governor from 1769 to 1777 and Boucher a tutor and Anglican parson in the Chesapeake from 1759 to 1775. Jones taught at the College of William and Mary from 1716 to 1721, and after briefly revisiting England, spent the rest of his life in Virginia and Maryland. Witherspoon, too, abandoned England for good. Other important commentators were native-born Americans, most notably Benjamin Franklin, Noah Webster, and Timothy Dwight.³³

33 Thomas Anburey, *Travels Through The Interior Parts of America* (New York, 1969; orig. pub. London, 1789), 2v.; Patrick Campbell, *Travels in the Interior Inhabited Parts of North America in the Years 1791 and 1792* (Toronto, 1937; orig. pub. Edinburgh, 1793); Nicholas Cresswell, *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1774–1777* (New York, 1924); John Davis, *Travels of Four Years and a Half in the United States of America During 1798, 1799, 1800, 1801, and 1802* (New York, 1909; orig. pub. London, 1803); Adam Gordon, “Journal of an Officer’s Travels in America and the West Indies, 1764–1765,” in Newton D. Mereness (ed.), *Travels in the American Colonies* (New York, 1916); Johann David Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation [1783–1784]* (Phila-

These men wrote lengthy accounts based not only on extensive personal observation but also on research. Jones' *The Present State of Virginia* (London, 1724) is a major primary source for early eighteenth-century Virginia. Eddis' *Letters From America . . . 1769 to 1777* offers a shrewd description of late colonial America by a functionary of the imperial administration. Dwight's *Travels in New England and New York* is a hefty four-volume overview of the early national northeastern United States.³⁴

Their keenness did not necessarily qualify them for linguistic analysis. None could be called a professional linguist in the modern academic sense. The travelers were amateurs; the sojourners and permanent settlers were serious students of languages. Jones and Webster came the closest to the current conception of a linguist. Yet, scholars who question the value of this sort of evidence tend to overlook Jones. His *An Accidence to the English Tongue* was the first grammar written in America. A contribution to the transatlantic language-reform movement, it sought to fix "a Publick Standard" by serving as "a Touchstone to true English." His intended audience was not just colonials; it also included Britons and "Foreigners," by which he meant non-Anglophone European immigrants. The other commentators were not linguists, but they were men of letters. Most made their living with words, as scholars, clergymen, or colonial administrators, a few of them assuming more than one of those roles.³⁵

delphia, 1911), II, 62. Montgomery, "Was Colonial American English a *Koine*?" 218, calls these observers "visitors, travelers, and journalists, mostly British"; Cooley, "Emerging Standard," 169, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 183, labels their comments "journalistic." The terms *journalist* and *journalistic* do not accurately describe these writers. They did not keep journals in the more modern private sense; they intended their accounts for a public audience. The profession of journalism did not exist in the eighteenth century. William Eddis (ed. Aubrey C. Land), *Letters From America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969); Anne Y. Zimmer, *Jonathan Boucher, Loyalist in Exile* (Detroit, 1978); Morton, "Editor's Introduction," in Jones, *Present State of Virginia*, 3-44; Martha Lou Lemmon Stohlmán, *John Witherspoon: Parson, Politician, Patriot* (Philadelphia, 1976).

34 Dwight (ed. Barbara Miller Solomon and Patricia M. King), *Travels in New England and New York* (New York, 1969), 4v. Montgomery, "Was Colonial American English a *Koine*?" 218, argues that "we know almost nothing about the range and frequency of contacts such observers had with the common populace." But given the length of time that they resided in America, anywhere from seven years to a lifetime, and the nature of early American social relations, as well as the extensive research that many of them did, these commentators' descriptions were not likely to have sprung from fleeting observation.

35 Cooley, "Emerging Standard," 175, distinguishes between "professional" and "nonprofessional" commentators. Referring to individuals such as Webster, Montgomery coins the term "language specialists" ("Was Colonial American English a *Koine*?" 219; "British and Irish

More important, a number of these observers were active in the language-reform campaign. Jones was the earliest and Webster the most noted. Witherspoon made his contribution, as did Boucher to a lesser degree. They did not apply modern, professional linguistic modes of analysis. Their observations reflected the assumptions, standards, and agendas of the contemporaneous movement to reform English speech and writing throughout the Anglophone world. Although they usually described colonial English only in general terms, they clearly operated from the perspective of a language reformer.³⁶

Beyond their shared assumptions about the English language, they had widely varying relationships to the colonies that were to become the independent United States. Jones and Franklin supported expansion of the Empire, but Franklin became an American nationalist, as did Witherspoon, Webster, and Dwight. Eddis and Boucher remained loyal; in fact, Boucher vehemently denounced the American Revolution and his former friend George Washington. Franklin could be called at least a proto-democrat, whereas Webster and Dwight favored elite rule. Despite these major differences in social and political perspective, all of these commentators adopted substantially similar standards for evaluating English usage and offered substantially similar descriptions of eighteenth-century American English. As usually happens “when speakers from the mother country comment upon their language as spoken in a colony”—in this case, travelers, sojourners, and immigrants, as well as American-born colonials schooled in metropolitan Standard English—they were struck by the ways in which colonial speech differed from typical English provincial speech. More than any other feature, they perceived North American English as unmarked by dialect differences—as homogeneous.³⁷

Antecedents,” 98). Like journalism, the concept of professionalism is largely anachronistic for the eighteenth century, particularly regarding an academic specialization such as linguistics. Jones, *Accidence*, 22, title page; Murray Cohen, *Sensible Words: Linguistic Practice in England, 1640–1785* (Baltimore, 1977), 51–52, 59; Richard J. Watts, “Mythical Strands in the Ideology of Prescriptivism,” in Laura Wright (ed.), *The Development of Standard English 1300–1800: Theories, Descriptions, Conflicts* (New York, 2000), 38–39.

36 Montgomery argues that the assumptions behind these observers’ judgments are hidden, but he does not consider their views within the context of the eighteenth-century language-reform movement (“Was Colonial American English a *Koine*?” 218–219; “British and Irish Antecedents,” 93–94, 97–98). Cooley, “Emerging Standard,” explores the influence of British linguistic standards on colonial American usage.

37 An anonymous reader of an earlier version of this article, a linguist, suggested giving more thought to the possible motives behind the claims of these eighteenth-century

HOMOGENEOUS AND DIALECT-FREE In 1724, Jones, the first to comment on the emergence of distinctive American modes of speech, contrasted them with England's dialects. Like many prescriptivists, he mistakenly attributed dialect differences to ignorance and slovenliness about proper pronunciation and vocabulary. Regarding English provincials' pronunciation, he wrote, "some Counties not only change the Sound of one Vowel for the Sound of another; but also drawl their Sound either too long, or too flat; and others speak too quick, and sharp; or else use the wrong Sound of the same Vowel." "Neither should the Western Manner of using (*v*) for (*f*) and (*z*) for (*s*) pass unobserved," he said, citing a feature that Fischer would mention two-and-a-half centuries later.

Regarding vocabulary, Jones noted that regional inhabitants sometimes used words "peculiar to the Place where they dwell; thus some say *thick* and *thuck* for *this* and *that* [another example that Fischer shares with him]; *bodder* is used in one Place, and *dunny* in another, instead of *deaf*; *anunt* for *against*; *awarter* for *cross*; *yatt* for *gate*; *tupp* for *ramm*, &c." Jones' taxonomy of dialects illustrates how carefully language reformers attended to such differences and opposed them. Starting from that perspective, he contrasted homeland provincials' dialect diversity with Virginians' and other colonials' usage of the mother tongue. In Jones' view, colonial speech did not transplant noticeable features of British dialects. Anglophone settlers had leveled out English dialect differences.³⁸

commentators—such as the desire to break away from Britain and to promote new ideas of equality and classlessness. Notions of "equality," however, did not become a powerful force until the early nineteenth century, and "classlessness" does not accurately describe how Americans have ever thought about social relations. Opportunity and social mobility would be more accurate. Americans who began to espouse "equality" and "democracy" during the 1780s and 1790s faced the opposition of elitists in favor of a traditional social hierarchy. Dwight and Webster, being elitists and High Federalists, were not attempting to erase the linguistic markers used in Britain to reinforce social rank. American nationalists, might have liked the idea of promoting the existence of an American national language. But Boucher and Eddis, who became British loyalists and left America at the beginning of the Revolution, asserted the homogeneity of colonial American English even more emphatically than the nationalists did. Moreover, neither Jones in the 1720s nor Franklin in the 1750s could have been influenced by nationalistic motives, because no colonials expressed or harbored such thoughts until the 1760s. Marckwardt and Dillard, *American English*, 69–70, 89; Montgomery, "British and Irish Antecedents," 97, 98.

38 Jones, *Accidence*, 11–15; *idem*, *Present State of Virginia*, 80.

By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, many observers were describing this leveled colonial speech as well-established and well-known. In 1759, Franklin invoked as common knowledge that, although in England individuals' geographical origins could be pinpointed by their speech, in North America they could not. A few years later, Eddis contrasted England's extreme dialect differences with the comparative homogeneity of colonial speech: "In England, almost every county is distinguished by a peculiar dialect . . . but in Maryland and throughout the adjacent provinces, it is worthy of observation that a striking similarity of speech universally prevails[.]" Witherspoon made the identical point: "There is a greater difference in dialect between one county and another in Britain than there is between one state and another in America." Cresswell, a Derbyshireman who traveled through the Chesapeake and the mid-Atlantic, reported, "No County or Colonial dialect is to be distinguished here, except it be the New Englanders, who have a sort of whining cadence that I cannot describe." Boucher considered "the Varieties" of pronunciation in England and the absence of dialects in the colonies "extraordinary." "In North America," he reported with wonder, "there prevails . . . a perfect uniformity."³⁹

Boucher went too far. Colonial speech was not perfectly uniform. Regional and local variations were apparent, as was individual style shifting. But, like Boucher, other observers were prone to overstate its homogeneity because of its obvious contrast with the profusion of sharp dialect divergences among British speakers. This relative lack of difference probably resulted from the mixing, leveling, and simplification that sociolinguists frequently detect in extraterritorial varieties of a language.⁴⁰

When observers described colonial English speech as "uniform," they did not mean "invariant." Language use is never truly homogeneous. Local and individual variations in pronunciation

39 Franklin to the Printer of the *Chronicle*, *The London Chronicle: or, Universal Evening Post*, 10–12 May, 1759, in Leonard W. Labaree et al. (eds.), *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1965), VIII, 340–342; Eddis, *Letters from America*, 33; Witherspoon, *Druid*, 181; Cresswell, *Journal*, 271. Montgomery, "British and Irish Antecedents," 97–98, points out that visitors to a new locale often noticed speakers' intonation first. Jonathan Boucher to Rev. Mr. James, December 23, 1777, "Letters of Rev. Jonathan Boucher," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, X (1916), 30.

40 Montgomery, "British and Irish Antecedents," 97–98.

and vocabulary appeared throughout the eighteenth century. Although they never restricted intelligibility, they may have gradually increased. The limited literary evidence for the early to mid-eighteenth century suggests that regional varieties had already emerged. The more abundant evidence for the late eighteenth century indicates that American speech was obviously—perhaps audibly—displaying greater regional variation. Although observers still spoke of the comparative uniformity of American speech, many also began to acknowledge the differences.⁴¹

Yet, observers continued to describe American speech as largely undifferentiated when compared to English speech. Dwight declared that the differences among Bostonians', New Yorkers', and Philadelphians' accents did not compare with the extreme divergences among English speakers. Although for years he had taught "youths from almost all the American states" at Yale College, he "ordinarily" could not "conjecture from their pronunciation the part of the country which gave them birth." To him, "the differences of pronunciation" among Americans were "of no moment." The same could not "be said of an equal number of people in any country of Europe." In America, nothing could "be called without an abuse of language, *dialect*." Like Boucher, however, Dwight overstated the case. But even his hyperbole manages to illustrate what was most important, and characteristic, about early American speech.⁴²

"GOOD," "PURE, AND "TRUE" This eighteenth-century perception of American English as homogeneous and dialect-free was linked to its evaluation as "good," "pure," and "true." Though only a few writers cited specific examples, many mentioned two areas of this speech that achieved the standard represented by London and its environs—pronunciation/accent and vocabulary/

41 For examples of variation from New England, see Sarah Kemble Knight, *The Journal of Madam Knight* [1704; New York, 1825], in Wendy Martin, (ed.), *Colonial American Travel Narratives* (New York, 1994), 49–75. Cooley, "Emerging Standard," 168, 170–173, 183; Witherspoon, *Druid*, 181–197. On late eighteenth-century New England speech, see Anburey, *Travels through the Interior*, II, 51; Campbell, *Travels in the Interior*, 157; Cresswell, *Journal*, 271; Read, "British Recognition of American Speech," 325–328; Henry M. Brooks, *The Olden Time Series. Gleanings Chiefly from Old Newspapers of Boston and Salem, Massachusetts* (Boston, 1886), 54–55; Davis, *Travels of Four Years and a Half*, 401.

42 Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, I, 367–68; IV, 196.

phraseology. Eddis declared, “the pronunciation of the generality of the people has an accuracy and elegance that cannot fail of gratifying the most judicious ear.” Boucher claimed that colonials exhibited “the purest Pronunciation of the English Tongue that is anywhere to be met with.” The terms “accuracy,” “elegance,” and “purity” were gauges that prescriptivists applied to measure conformity to standard English.⁴³

Gordon, a Scottish soldier who toured the colonies in the 1760s, made virtually the same point about word usage and grammar. He confessed, “the propriety of Language here [in Philadelphia] surprized me much, the English tongue being spoken by all ranks, in a degree of purity and perfection, surpassing any, but the polite part of London.” What his use of the prescriptivist concepts of “propriety,” “purity,” and “perfection” intended to convey was that the speech of Philadelphians conformed to the definitions and grammatical rules accepted by the metropolitan elite. Gordon heard colonial speech for only a few months. Those who heard it for years often agreed that colonials of “all ranks” spoke proper English. Already in the mid-1720s, Jones announced that colonials’ speech was “good” and “true” English. Half a century later, Witherspoon asserted, “the vulgar in America speak much better than the vulgar in Great-Britain.” Cresswell summed up the eighteenth-century consensus when he declared that Americans “in general speak better English than the English do.”⁴⁴

Instead of applying objective standards, the observers said that the colonials did not reproduce the regional dialects that language reformers considered corruptions of “pure” English. Jones and Witherspoon might conceivably have wanted to show that colonials were by no means uncivilized bumpkins to place American divergences in a favorable light, but Boucher and Eddis,

43 Eddis, *Letters from America*, 33; Boucher, “Letters,” 30.

44 Adam Gordon, “Journal of an Officer’s Travels,” 411; Jones, *Accidence*, 13–15; *idem*, *Present State of Virginia*, 80; Read, “British Recognition of American Speech in the 18th Century,” 322, n. 37; *idem*, “Bilingualism in the Middle Colonies, 1725–1775,” *American Speech*, XII (1937), 93–99; Witherspoon, *Druid*, 181; Cresswell, *Journal*, 271. James Adams, *The Pronunciation of the English Language Vindicated from Imputed Anomaly & Caprice* (Menston, England, 1968; orig. pub. Edinburgh, 1799), 144–146, described Anglophone dialects in various regions of the British Isles where “the English classical pronunciation is counteracted.” In contrast, “the Anglo-Americans speak English with great classical purity. Dialect in general is there less prevalent than in Britain, except amongst the poor slaves.”

who made the same claim, became loyalists. Hence, revolutionary incentives do not explain the prevailing view of colonial speech.⁴⁵

Other evidence suggests that emulation of a metropolitan linguistic standard may be common in colonial societies. During the seventeenth century, a range of French dialects was initially transplanted in the French colony on the St. Lawrence River. By the eighteenth century, however, many French Canadians appear to have spoken a strain of their language fairly close to Parisian French—the emerging “national,” and therefore “imperial,” standard. This phenomenon allegedly occurred not only among elite Canadians but also among Canadians in the lower social ranks. Kalm, a Swedish visitor who toured the northern English colonies and Canada from 1748 to 1751, reported, “All are of the opinion that in Canada the ordinary man speaks a purer French than in any province in France, yea that in this respect it can vie with Paris itself.” As with the observers of eighteenth-century British colonial speech, the hard linguistic data that would confirm Kalm’s claims are not available. Nonetheless, the observation recurs frequently enough in different colonial situations to warrant serious consideration.⁴⁶

Speech accommodation theory offers a social-psychological explanation for colonials’ efforts to conform to a metropolitan standard: Speakers and writers tend to accommodate their speech toward prestige dialects. In a colonial context of dialect mixing, in which speakers unconsciously select linguistic elements from a variety of dialects, psychological motivations promoting convergence toward the most prestigious metropolitan standard dialect probably operated with even greater force than in other situations of dialect contact and mixing. Members of the North American

45 Two centuries later, Thomas Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language* (New York, 1964), 222–223, explained that “all types of American English have grown out of the regional modifications of the British Standard.” For that reason, “American English resembles present Standard British English more closely than it resembles any other British type of speech” and, therefore, “compared with British English . . . and other European languages, American speech is quite homogeneous.” See also Longmore, ““They . . . speak better English””; Cooley, “Emerging Standard,” 180–184.

46 Peter Kalm (ed. Adolph B. Benson), *Peter Kalm’s Travels in North America* (New York, 1937), I, 554; J. M. Bumsted, “The Cultural Landscape of Early Canada,” in Bailyn and Morgan (eds.), *Strangers*, 369.

British colonial elite and middling classes assiduously copied not just British, or even English, cultural forms; they specifically targeted southeastern English fashions, ideas, institutional models, and other cultural features. This pattern is typical of colonial elites, especially in the mature phase of colonies' development. In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, elite and middling Anglophone colonials energetically schooled themselves as well as people lower down in the social hierarchy in speaking and writing "proper" English.⁴⁷

North American colonization generated more extensive dialect contact and mixing than ever occurred in early modern Britain. The necessities of migration and settlement, along with the imperatives and motivations inherent in empire-building, prompted Anglophone colonials to accommodate their various speech ways to one another. By the early eighteenth century, American varieties of English, extraterritorial immigrant koines, began to emerge in several regions. Meanwhile, the settlers' status within the imperial system also shaped these mixed colonial varieties. In such societies, dominant groups are acutely aware of the cultural forms and standards of the imperial core. Particularly in the mature phase of social development, Anglophone colonials—most influentially those in the elite and middling ranks—consciously and unconsciously copied metropolitan Standard English. Both higher-status and upwardly mobile colonials used this "proper" and "true" English to mark their status within the colonial social hierarchy and elevate their individual and collective standing within the Empire. The regionally differentiated but comprehensible, American colonial language system helped prepare Anglophone colonials to receive the idea of American nationhood. Although British speech

47 Cross, *Evolution*, 31–33, 110–111; Kytö, "Emergence of American English," 124; Marckwardt and Dillard, *American English*, 70, 89; Quirk, *English Language*, 4; Richards, "Scotland," 96–97; Longmore, "'They . . . speak better English.'" Montgomery, "Was Colonial American English a *Koine*?" 231–232, reasonably concludes that style shifting—accommodating speech to the social situation and the rank of interlocutors—may partially account for observers' descriptions of the correctness and purity of early American English speech. See also Cooley, "Emerging Standard," 180–184. If Montgomery is correct, such style shifting may have reflected accommodation to the trend toward standard English. Dwight might have not been able to detect his students' regional backgrounds by their speech because they were shifting to the standard expected of them at Yale College.

displayed a diversity of dialects that standardizing reformers and British nationalists had to combat, American Revolutionary nationalists did not need to impose a common “national” language. The dominant Anglophone members of the “nation” already effectively possessed one.⁴⁸

48 Cooley, “Emerging Standard,” 168–178; Dillard, *All-American English*, 45–76; *idem*, *Toward a Social History of American English*, 51–72; Kytö, *Variation and Diachrony*, 18–23; Marckwardt and Dillard, *American English*, 89; Read, “British Recognition of American Speech,” 325. On the continued relative homogeneity of American as compared to British English, see Pyles, *Words and Ways*, 69–71; Quirk, *English Language and Images of Matter*, 4–7; Marckwardt and Dillard, *American English*, 70; Boorstin, *Americans*, 273; Pyles, *Origins and Development*, 220.