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## **West Virginia Dialects**

In West Virginia, numerous languages are spoken. While the most populous language is English, Spanish is spoken by thousands. There are also users of language as diverse as Pennsylvania German and American Sign Language.

Regardless of the language spoken or signed, everybody who has a language has a dialect, since a dialect is simply a label for a variety of language spoken by a social group. Thus, a West Virginia dialect is a cover term for a wide variety of different language patterns, both in terms of grammar and sound. In describing dialects, it is best to talk about *dialect features*. A dialect feature is a specific pattern of language of a dialect. For example, the regular spoken past tense in English is formed by adding either a *-t*, *-d*, or *-Id* sound, depending on the last sound of the verb: for verbs like *bike*, *pipe*, or *pass*, a *-t* is added; for verbs like *bag*, *lob*, and *sneeze* a *-d* is added; for verbs ending in a *t* or *d* sound, like *knit*, *bat*, and *need*, a *-Id* sound is added. This pattern is based on sounds in the language and is largely an unconscious process, as are most features of any of the world's 6,000 or so languages. A West Virginia dialect of English refers to the English spoken by West Virginians who spent most of their formative years in the state.

On traditional dialect maps, the state of West Virginia falls in four dialect regions. As anyone knows who has traveled from Wheeling to Princeton, the variety of English spoken across the state is diverse. Two dialect regions that cross West Virginia are in the Northern Panhandle and the Eastern Panhandle. Both of these regions are under influence from urban and suburban areas in neighboring states and reflect this regional influence. The two largest regions are the Lower North and Upper South, which essentially divide the state into a southern and northern half.

The dialect regions of West Virginia have no rigid boundaries and fluctuate according to rural and urban areas. These regions connect to dialect regions of other states, and no dialect follows a state boundary. Differences in vowels best illustrate the dialect regions of West Virginia. The Northern and Southern halves of West Virginia generally pronounce the vowels of words like *pin*~*pen* and *cot*~*caught* the same, but the Northern Panhandle does make distinct the vowels of words like *pin* and *pen*. The Southern region is distinct from the other three by participating in a complicated language change where at least four vowels in many words are changing sounds: the vowel in words like *hit* is switching places with the vowel in words like *heat* (*She made a [hJeet]* and *Turn up the [hit]*); the vowel in words like *bet* is switching places with the vowel in words like *bait* (*He made a [beheet] on the game* and *The fish took the [beht]*). Although a natural language change, this Southern change is often unfairly stigmatized. The Eastern Panhandle is marked by more cohesion with Pennsylvania, Northern Virginia, and Maryland: For this reason, the merger of

vowels in words like *pin~pen* and *hill~heel* are less prevalent in the Eastern Panhandle although the *cot~caught* merger may remain common for natives. There are also important differences within any one region. For example, the rural speech of Southern West Virginia is not the same as the suburban speech of Charleston. As is true for all societies, no geographical region of West Virginia is uniform in its language.

For the entire state, one popular myth is that Elizabethan English is still spoken. The varieties of West Virginia English are diverse, but there is no room for Elizabethan English in the definition. Elizabethan English is not spoken in West Virginia or anywhere else today, and there are two reasons why. First, Elizabethan English, spoken during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) was never spoken in West Virginia. In 1603 Jamestown was only an idea, and major settlement in the region to become West Virginia did not begin until the eighteenth century. The second reason is that all languages change. Even if there had been a settlement of Elizabethan English speakers, and they had remained isolated until today, their great-great . . . great grandchildren would not speak the same dialect as did their forbearers.

Although West Virginia was settled by Europeans, and English became the dominant language, at no point was there a only a single variety of English in West Virginia. A diversity of Englishes entered the future state, for example the English of the Ulster Scots (Scots-Irish) and the English of southwestern England. As there were different dialects, there was a social ranking amongst those dialects, with Scots-Irish often the lowest on the social ladder. An often

remarked dialect feature demonstrates a link to Scots-Irish heritage: *The children need separated* vs. *The children need to be separated*. Although upsetting to some for social reasons, the different uses of a verb like *need* is perfectly normal. A verb is the boss in a sentence and requires certain things to come after it. For example, the verb *to kiss* requires a following noun, as in *The girl kissed the boy*. The verb *to need* in other areas requires a verb, like *to be*; inside most of West Virginia, the verb *to need* only requires an adjective, like *washed* or *separated*. This same bit of variation is found in parts of the British Isles, especially Scotland.

Another Scots-Irish link is a fading pattern of subject-verb concord that dates back at least six centuries. This pattern includes an -s in sentences like *The dogs walks* and *The people gos*. The most famous Scots-Irish features is *a*-prefixing, as in *He went a-hunting*. *A*-prefixing is a normal yet complex linguistic process dating back at least four centuries. It originated in sentences like *She is at working* which meant that the action was going on at that moment.

One of the features of both Appalachian and Southern English is a single vowel in words like *mine* (mahn), *mile* (mahl), and *hide* (hahd). Some people in Southern West Virginia have the additional ability to produce this single-vowel feature in words such as *wipe*, *light*, *bike*, *spice*, and *knife*. Two caveats should be mentioned. Younger generations of West Virginians do not maintain this additional ability as well as do older generations. African-American Vernacular English, originally a Southern variety, did not have this Appalachian feature,

but some African-American Appalachians actually have this traditional feature of Appalachian English.

Some of the features of English in West Virginia are socially stigmatized, despite their longevity through the centuries or their linguistic naturalness. One such feature is pronouncing some <th> sounds as <f>, *birfday* for *birthday*. This feature can be found in varieties of English throughout the English speaking world because of its linguistic naturalness. Another feature is using the same form of a verb for the present and past tense, for example *She come home yesterday* instead of *She came home yesterday*. Throughout the history of English, *come* and *came* have fluctuated as the past tense forms. In West Virginia, it is not unusual to find *come* as the only form.

What makes the English of West Virginia unique is not any one particular dialect feature, but the constellation of features found in our state. For example, making the *l* in *help* less prominent and more like a vowel is found in dialects of different regions throughout the US. The same can be said for pronouncing the vowels of the following words the same in each pair: *pin~pen, pool~pull, cot~caught, hill~heel*. The mergers between these vowel pairs can be found in other states, but the collection of all of them together is a distinctly West Virginian characteristic. A dialect feature like using *was* for every subject (e.g., *The children was running around*) can be found in almost every vernacular variety of English the world over, including West Virginia English. What is more rare is to find all of these features in the same state, but this is exactly the case in West Virginia. It is true that some features are being

lost in West Virginia: A dialect feature like the vowel change in *soda-pop* pronounced as *sodi-pop* is limited to mostly rural, older speakers. On the other hand, some dialect features are being born: In the eastern panhandle of the state, a plural form of the word *beef* is *beaves* and is used even in written advertising. Through such innovative linguistic processes, as long as West Virginia maintains a separate social identity, the state will continue to preserve unique dialects.