

The Fate of Dialect Variation: Dissipation, Concentration, Differentiation

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Abstract:

In this talk, I discuss the current state and possible future of dialect variation in the US. I focus chiefly on two endangered language varieties on the East Coast, those of Ocracoke Island, North Carolina and Smith Island, MD. Investigation of the patterning of a number of dialect features across different generations and over time shows that though the two island communities historically have been similar in many ways, their distinctive varieties of English are dying via quite different pathways and that even very small dialects may maintain their distinctiveness even as their population of speakers dwindles. I conclude by taking a broader look at dialect variation in the US, again demonstrating that, contrary to what we might expect, dialect differentiation is not necessarily diminishing in the face of increasing intercommunication, mobility and media exposure. Rather, the nation's major dialects may actually be becoming more rather than less distinctive from one another, thus raising questions regarding the role of contact/exposure vs. social factors such as individual and group identity in dialect dissipation, intensification, and differentiation.

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