



Around the world, people have always passed down their history through the art of oral storytelling. North Carolinian Ray Hicks (1922–2003) lived his whole life on Beech Mountain, but he was famous worldwide for his Appalachian storytelling. In 1993 he was awarded the prestigious National Heritage Award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Image by Tom Pich, courtesy of the NEA.

Mountain Talk

by Paul Reed*

Across North Carolina the geography changes a lot—from the coastal plain in the east to high mountain ranges in the west. If you were to travel across North Carolina from east to west, you would also notice that the way that people speak also changes greatly. In fact, you may have heard that “in the mountains, they talk like Shakespeare.” While this isn’t quite true, it shows that people recognize that mountain folk speak differently from other areas of North Carolina.

For example, some mountaineers say “waspers” for *wasps* or pronounce *I* as “ah” and *nice* as “nahs.” Some mountain dwellers might say, “I thought he was a-running” or “We aim to be there.” To many mountaineers, the phrase “I don’t care to go” actually means that the person is willing to go. Mountain dwellers’ recognizable way of speaking comes from three main factors: history, geography, and identity.

Before we investigate why people speak differently, there are two important concepts to understand. First, everyone who speaks any language has an individual way of speaking, from distinctive sounds to particular words to different sentence constructions. Second, language constantly changes.

Where you are from and what different social groups you belong to shape your words and how you speak. For example, in North Carolina the insect we might call a *lightning bug* is a *firefly* in Pennsylvania. Also, a birdwatcher and a Twitter user have very different meanings for the word *tweet*.

You may already have some idea that language changes: your grandparent might call a *shopping cart* a *buggy*. Or you may have said you were going to *google* something and gotten an odd look from a great-grandparent. These examples show that language has changed over time and is still changing.

Often, as individuals come together into groups, everyone begins to share ways of speaking—the people form dialects. One clear example are regional dialects that characterize the different ways people speak based on geographical areas, like the mountain region of western North Carolina.

History

Throughout history, when people from the Old Country immigrated to the New World, they brought many things: keepsakes, recipes, clothing styles, and religious beliefs. They also brought their own language. The speech of the people who settle an area has a lasting impact on their new home.

American Indian nations have lived in western North Carolina for centuries. Two main immigrant groups settled into the area: the English coming east from the Coast and Piedmont and the Scots-Irish coming south down the valleys from Virginia. As the two immigrant groups converged in the mountains, their ways of speaking combined. This combination, with influence from American Indian languages and the languages of other immigrant groups, blended into a distinct way of speaking.

In Appalachian North Carolina, we see the continued influence of these early groups. The Scots-Irish always pronounced *r* after vowels, so words like *bear* ended in an *r* sound in the mountains, and still does. In other areas of North Carolina, and in other southern regions, *r* after a vowel sounded more like *ah*, so *bear* would sound like *beah*. Those differences remain to this day. Another example: Many places still have names derived from American Indian words, such as Lake Junaluska.

Geography

The high ridges, deep valleys, and many rivers of Appalachia contributed (and still contribute!) to the beauty of the region. But they also made travel difficult, especially before the invention of modern transportation, like cars. So people stayed put, and communication with other groups of people was somewhat limited. Differences in communication caused some features to be *conserved* (kept safe from change), while others were innovated.

When people who share a language are separated, small differences in speech accumulate in each group from variations among individuals. These small differences are passed on from parents to children, and as time passes, small differences grow into bigger ones. Groups that sounded very similar in the past gradually begin to sound different over time. For example, that’s why our English in the United States sounds so different from the English spoken in England.

In western North Carolina, the rough mountain terrain separated people from one another. Some areas had

more contact with larger cities and towns than others. In those places the way people spoke would continue to be influenced by other English varieties. People in the more isolated communities would have less contact with these newer varieties of English, so more of their traditional features would be conserved. However, this lack of contact also meant that any change that originated within their isolated communities would not spread, so unique new features would also develop.

This mix of conserved and innovated speech is why the speech of Appalachia is *similar* to the rest of North Carolina, but also different. For example, in Appalachia, many people pronounce the words *pin* and *pen* the same—as do many people across the rest of the state and throughout the South. One difference is that in most of the South, the vowel sound in words like *I*, *prize*, and *prime* sounds like “ah,” but in words like *price* and *right* it is more like “ah-ee.” In Appalachia all those words have a strong “ah” vowel sound.

Identity

You may have noticed that all of the examples in this article refer to “many people” or “some people” sounding a certain way or using a particular feature. This reinforces the idea that not everyone sounds the same or uses the same speech features even when they belong to the same group or are from the same area. A major influence on how people talk is personal identity. People want to express their personality through their speech—to sound or not sound a certain way.



THINK ABOUT IT

A century ago, most people lived their whole lives in one place and rarely traveled. They were isolated from people who spoke in a different way.

How did modern technology—like phones, TVs, and computers—change that? Do you think we will all talk the same way one day?

Many people who study and write about Appalachia discuss the regional pride that many mountain people have. To people with regional pride, sounding Appalachian may be very important, so they might hold on to their way of speaking. However, other people may *not* want to sound Appalachian, so they might choose to use fewer mountain features, or maybe none at all. Those choices tell a little bit about the person’s personality and the pride that they feel or don’t feel toward the place where they’re from.

The Future

Language is constantly changing. What makes a person sound mountain now may not be the same in the future. Yet some people will still want to express their regional pride and sound a certain way. It will be exciting to hear and to research what those speech features may be! 🌸

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