

3. Regional Dialects

Sociology of Language (Spring 2021)

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Regionalism

- You can often tell where someone is from based on their speech – their accent, the sentence structures they use, and the words that they choose.

Regional variation in the way a language is spoken is likely to provide one of the easiest ways of observing variety in language.

- In sociolinguistics, we refer to these region-based varieties as *regional dialects*.
- What's something that might identify someone as being from New York? Mississippi? England?

Note! An accent alone does not make a dialect.

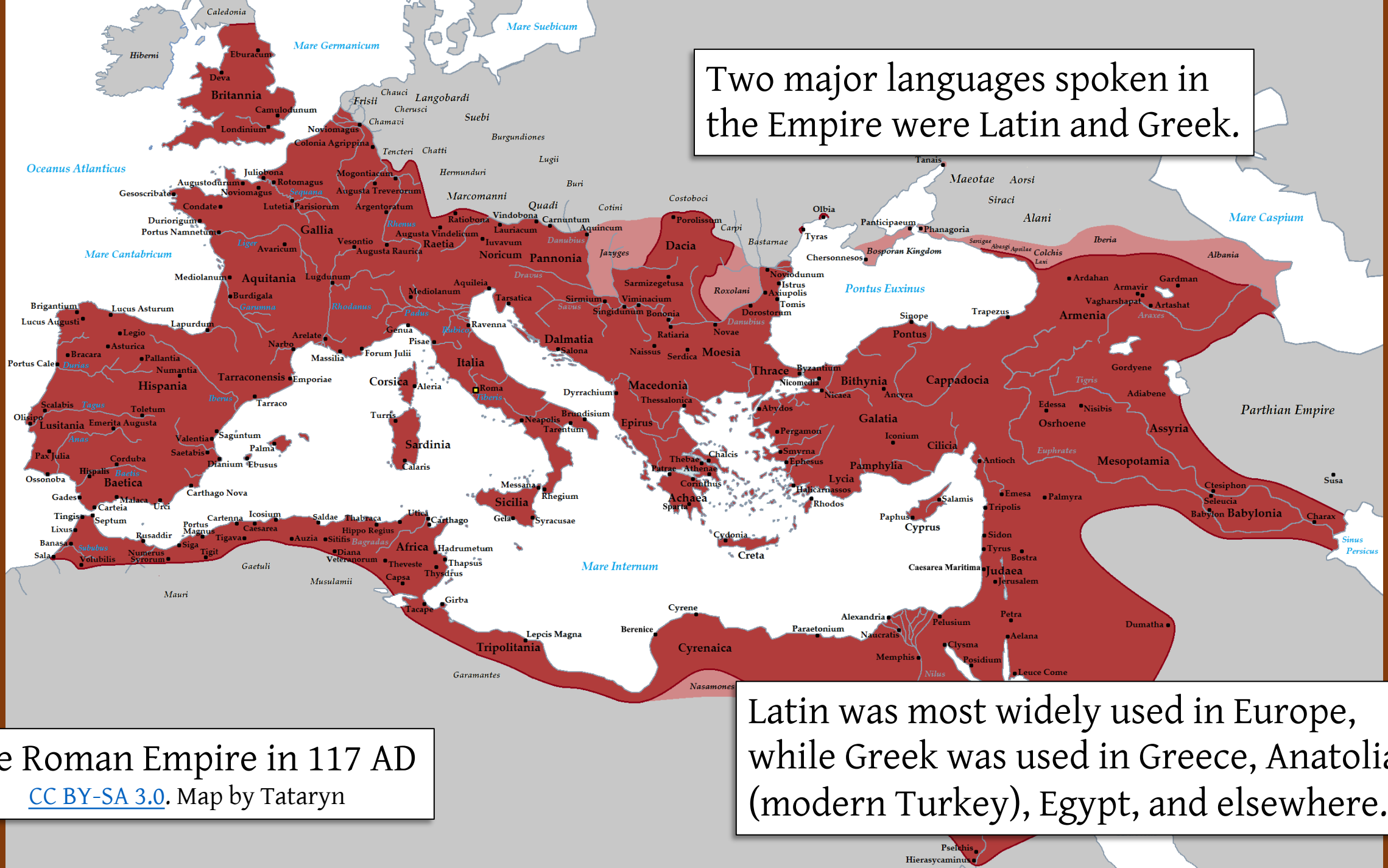
Regionalism

- Sometimes, there are sharp borders between regional dialects.
- On the other hand, there often exists a *dialect continuum*, where changes are gradual.

[There are] parts of the world, where it was (and still is) possible to travel long distances and, by making only small changes in speech from location to location, continue to communicate with the inhabitants.

- This existed in mainland western Europe around the time of the fall of the Roman empire, as we'll see.

Two major languages spoken in the Empire were Latin and Greek.



The Roman Empire in 117 AD
CC BY-SA 3.0. Map by Tataryn

Latin was most widely used in Europe, while Greek was used in Greece, Anatolia (modern Turkey), Egypt, and elsewhere.

Romance Languages in Europe

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All of these languages descended from Latin.

Centuries ago, there were many different *regional dialects* of Latin.

At that time, much of western Europe was a single *dialect continuum*.

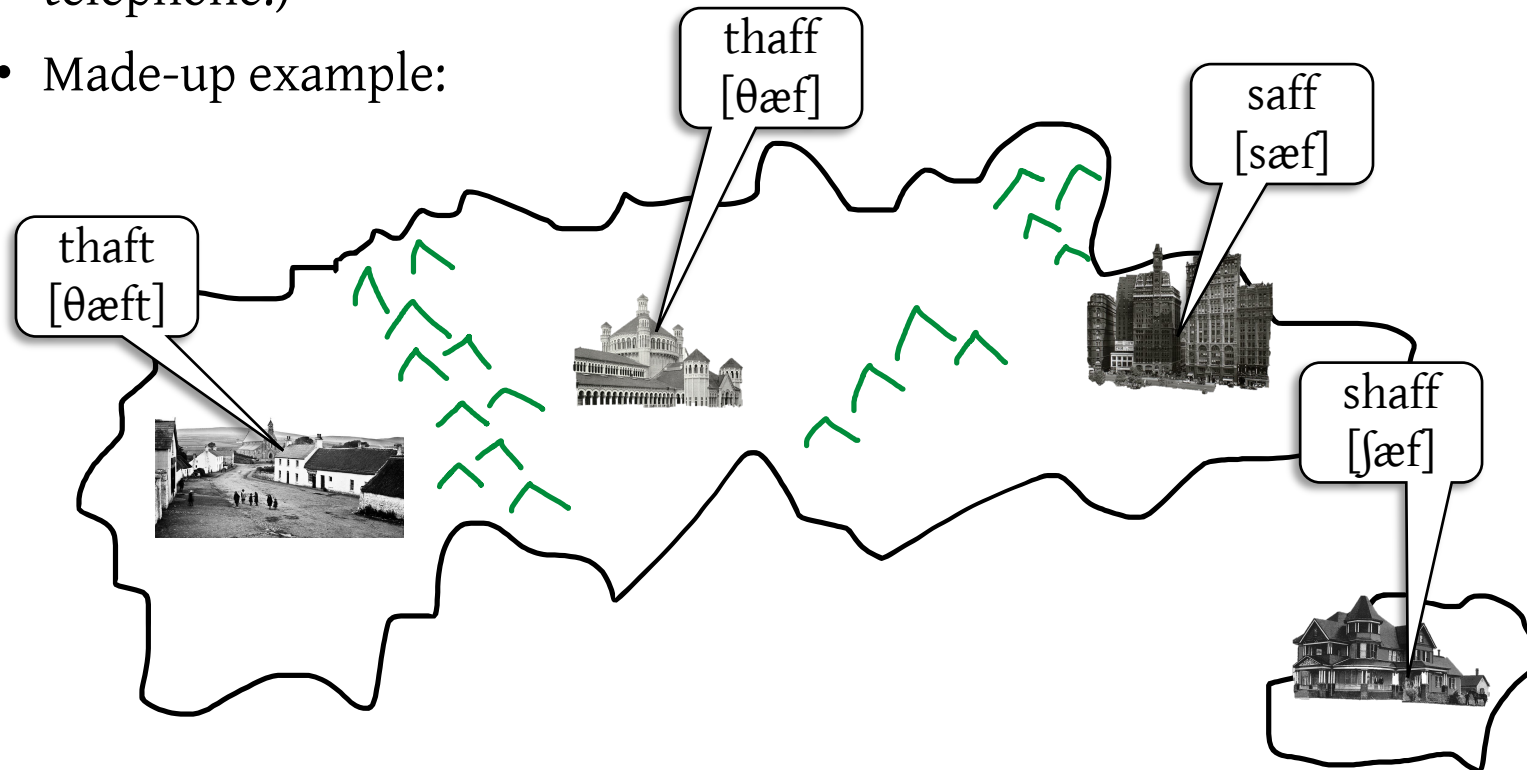
Over time, those regional dialects diverged so significantly that they became different languages.

But just how hard *are* these borders?

	Spanish		Portuguese		Occitan (Languedocien)		Provençal		Romanian
	Catalan		French		Franco-Provençal		Italian		Sardinian

Dialect continuum

- In a dialect continuum, each adjacent community is mutually intelligible, *but* the communities at the ends of the continuum may be – and often are – mutually unintelligible. (Similar to a game of telephone.)
- Made-up example:



Dialects vs. politics

- Dialect continuums are disrupted by the rise of nation-states and borders, and the standardization of languages.

Various pressures [...] serve to harden current state boundaries and to make the linguistic differences among states more, not less, pronounced. Dialects continue therefore to disappear as national languages arise. They are subject to two kinds of pressure: one from within, to conform to a national standard, and one from without, to become different from standards elsewhere.

Dialect geography

- We can map out the distribution of a particular linguistic variable, or even a whole set of linguistic features.
- For example, the linguistic variable of what one calls a sweetened carbonated beverage: soda, pop, coke, or soft drink.
- Dialect geographers work to come up with questions that will help differentiate between regional dialects.

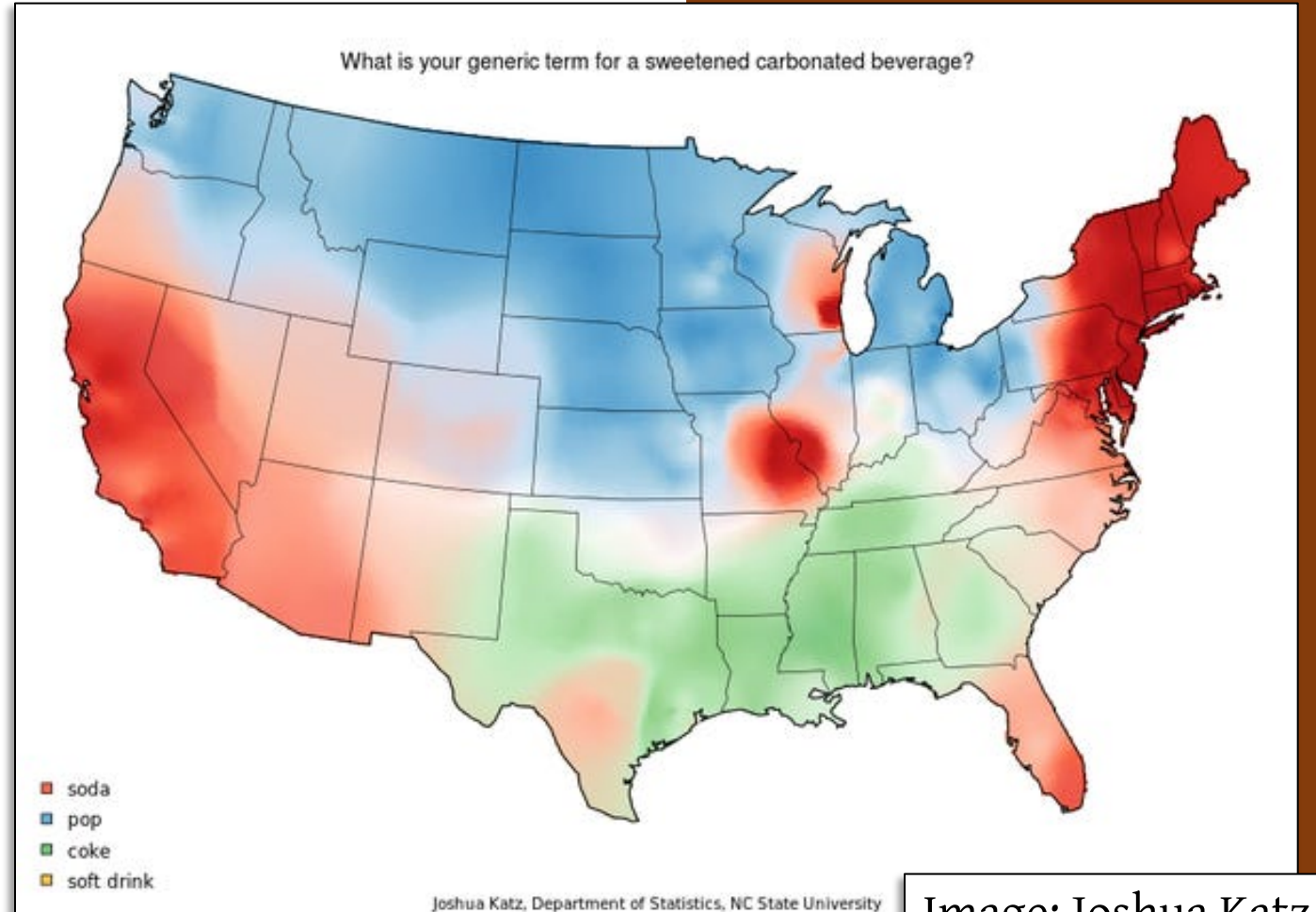
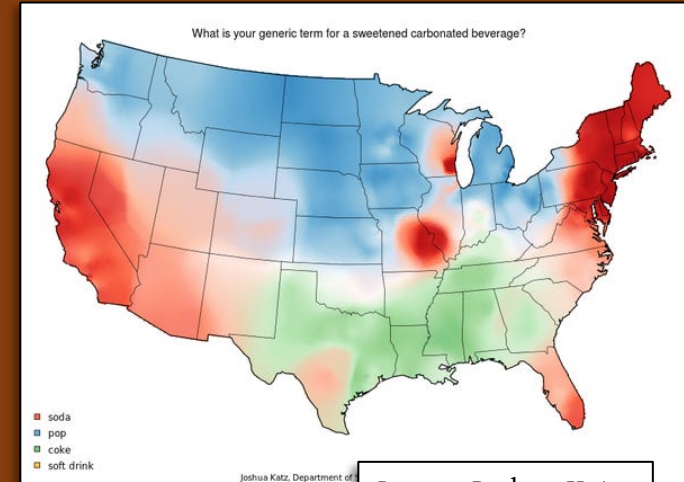


Image: Joshua Katz

Dialect geography

- We can come up with questions whose answers are pegged to different regional dialects.
- In the map on the right, *soda* is in red, *pop* is in blue, *coke* is in green, and *soft drink* is yellow. This shows that these words have clear regional alignments – coke in the south, pop in much of the Midwest, and soda elsewhere.
- These boundaries are called *isoglosses*.



Isoglosses [...] distinguish an area in which a certain feature is found from areas in which it is absent. When several such isoglosses coincide, the result is sometimes called a *dialect boundary*. Then we may be tempted to say that speakers on one side of that boundary speak one dialect and speakers on the other side speak a different dialect.

Discussion! (p.47, q.1)

- What regional differences are you aware of in the pronunciation of each of the following words:

butter		with
farm	which	happy
bird	witch	house
oil	Cuba	Mary
bag	spear	merry
cot	bath	marry
caught		

Discussion! (p.48, q.4)

- What other names are you aware of for the objects sometimes referred to by the names below? Who uses each variant?

seesaw

thumbtack

cobweb

soft drink

sidewalk

gym shoe

streetcar

elevator

Discussion! (p.48, q.6)

- Each of the following is found in some variety of English. Each is comprehensible. Which do you yourself use? Which do you not use? Explain how those utterances you do not use differ from those you do use.

I haven't spoken to him.

I've not spoken to him.

Is John at home?

Is John home?

Give me it.

Give it me.

Give us it.

I wish you would have said so.

I wish you'd said so.

Don't be troubling yourself.

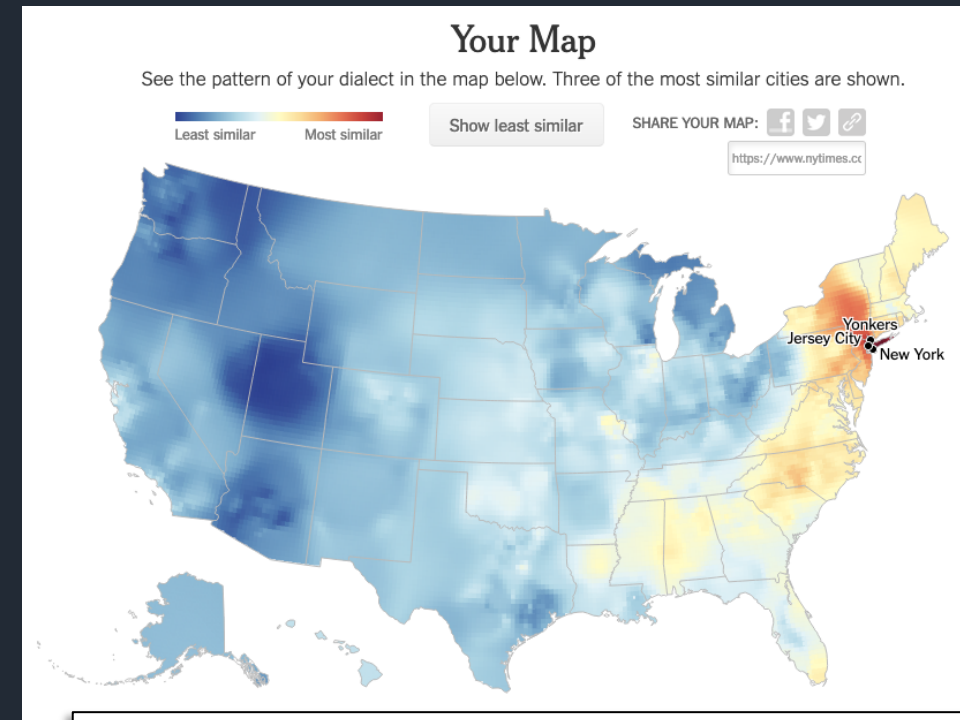
Coming home tomorrow he is.

Discussion! (p.48, q.7)

- How might you employ a selection of items from the above questions to compile a checklist that could be used to determine the geographical (and possibly social) origins of a speaker of English?

Task!

- Take the 25-question dialect quiz by Josh Katz and Wilson Andrews, available here: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/upshot/dialect-quiz-map.html>
- Answer each question honestly!
- At the end, it will generate a final map – “Your Map.” Click the link icon next to “Share your map,” and paste the url in our group chat. We’ll look at some of our results together.



These are my results, as of 25 Feb 2021.

Accent

- Accent is a part of what distinguishes a regional dialect, but an accent alone does not make a dialect.
- One of the most well-known accents is called Received Pronunciation (RP), aka the Queen's English, Oxford English, BBC English.
- An English accent, widely heard on the BBC, among English professionals, and in education.
- RP is very few people's native accent, and it is decidedly non-regional.



This is likely what you think of as a classic English accent.

If any of you learned English in Europe or Asia, you were probably taught with this accent.

Accent

- Another accent is “general American” – the kind of American accent that’s widely used by broadcasters, and is generally seen as non-regional.
- Even though some accents seem “neutral,” *everyone* has an accent. All speech is accented.
- What does it mean for one accent to be recognized as “normal” or default, while those with different accents “have an accent”?

Discussion! (p.49, q.10)

- There may have been a recent fall-off in the high social prestige associated with RP in England and elsewhere. How might you establish whether such is the case?

For next week...

- Take Quiz #2, and submit it by 2:30pm next Friday!
- Read the rest of this chapter.