

IS THERE A MIDLAND DIALECT OF AMERICAN ENGLISH, REVISITED?  
A REPLY TO DAVIS AND HOUCK

Terry Lynn Irons

Morehead State University

Aside from his groundbreaking work in initiating and overseeing the first (and ongoing) systematically-detailed field investigations into the regional speech of America, that is, the LAUSACA project, one of the most significant accomplishments of Hans Kurath is the recognition of a distinct Midland dialect of American English. As he writes in the Preface to *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States*,

One fact of major importance seems to me to be fully established: There is an extensive Midland speech area that lies between the traditionally recognized "Northern" and "Southern" areas. This Midland area . . . is linguistically distinct from the Northern and the Southern areas and is in part set off by sharp boundaries. (1949: v)

Later, he indicates that "the Midland is not a uniform speech area, but it has a considerable body of words that sets it off from the North and the South" (1949: 27), of which more will be said later. Following Kurath, the traditional view of dialectology maintains a tripartite view of American dialects, which has consistently influenced and yet continues to influence how many approach dialect research and classification in the United States.

The notion of a distinct Midland region was first challenged by C-J Bailey, who uses anecdotal evidence from his experience in Nashville, Tennessee to argue that the boundary between North Midland and South Midland is more significant than the boundary separating South Midland and the South. He concludes that there are only two major regions, Northern and Southern, with subregions labeled Inner and Outer North and Inner and Outer South (1968).

A serious challenge to Kurath's hypothesis is presented by Lawrence Davis and Charles Houck in their *AS* article "Is There a Midland Dialect Area?--Again." In answering this question, they argue that the "data do not support the positing of a separate and distinct Midland dialect area" and suggest that this region is "better understood as a linear transition area between two dialects . . . than as a separate Midland" (1992: 61-62). As invaluable as their work is for bringing a rigorous statistical methodology to bear on the impressionistic observations of the pioneers in American dialectology, their conclusions are not warranted, for a number of reasons discussed below. First, however, a brief summary of their methodology is in order.

To test their hypothesis that there is a continuum of Northern to Southern dialect moving north to south, rather than a clearly demarcated Midland, Davis and Houck chose eleven eastern locations on a north/south line, reflecting the three areas set out by Kurath 1949, and examined twelve lexical items and four phonological features among the data collected from these communities, recorded in the field materials of LAMSAS, the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and

South Atlantic States, now located in archives at the University of Georgia. The phonological features examined include the /ai/ and /au/ diphthongs, the low back vowel in *dog*, *frost*, and *log*, and postvocalic /r/. The lexical items examined include the Northern words *wishbone*, *corn bread*, *andirons*, *paper bag*, *take (someone) home*, *a little way*, *creek*, *midwife*, *clabber*, *skunk*, *corn husks*, and *sweet corn* as well as their Southern counterparts *pull(y) bone*; *corn pone*, *pone bread*, *pone*; *firedogs*, *dog irons*; *poke*; *carry (someone) home*; *a little piece*; *run*, *branch*; *granny woman*; *clabber(ed) milk*, *bonny clabb(pp)er*, *polecat*; *shucks*; and *roasting ears*. They selected these specific items because, so they say, they were used "to establish and reaffirm the notion of three distinct dialect areas" and because "they are clearly distributed regionally as Northern and Southern forms" (62).

To analyze the data, Houck and Davis determine the frequency and percentage of Southern forms for each location. The percentages are analyzed using regression analysis, coefficient of correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ), and the Durbin-Watson statistic. The value of these tests is that they can reveal the linearity of correlations between two variables. In this case, the variables correlated are the percentage occurrence of a form and the distance south. If there is a gradual transition or continuum from North to South "rather than a movement from a clearly defined Northern dialect to a clearly defined Midland dialect to a clearly defined Southern dialect" (65), the tests will show a linear relation between the variables. The three conditions for a linear relation are a high correlation coefficient, a low Root Mean Square Residual value, and a Durbin-Watson value indicating linearity.

Davis and Houck report that the "correlation between the geographical site and both Southern phonological forms and lexical items was significant" (65), with  $r = 0.874$  for phonological items and  $r = 0.946$  for lexical items, approaching the perfect correlation of 1, which implies a strictly linear relation. In addition, they report that "the low RMS Residuals and the valid Durbin-Watson statistics support the visual notion that the dots do cluster around the regression lines to the extent that both the lexical and phonological relationships to distance south are indeed linear" (65). The lack of wide divergences of residuals from the regression line supports the hypothesis of a gradual transition north to south rather than a clearly demarcated middle region.

As Davis and Houck see it, the linear relation revealed in this analysis suggests that "as one moves further and further south, the more Southern the dialect becomes. In short, there are not three distinct dialect areas, but a gradual move to Southernness until there is an overwhelming incidence of Southern dialect features in the Southern dialect area" (67). They conclude that "our data do not support naming the geographical area called 'Midland' by Kurath as anything other than a transition area" (68), "the unique identity of which, based on our results at least, turns out to be questionable at the very least" (68).

As impressive and invaluable as their use of sophisticated inferential statistical procedures to address dialect questions is, the conclusions of Davis and Houck are 'questionable at the very least,' for a variety of reasons. One involves the assumptions underlying the interpretation of the statistical results; another involves the selection of locations and linguistic items for analyses.

The method utilized by Davis and Houck to interpret the results of the regression analysis and correlation coefficient makes several unstated assumptions regarding what defines or constitutes a dialect. The primary assumption underlying their hypothesis about linearity of correlation is that a dialect is defined by a sharp boundary, which would be indicated by a "wide divergence of the individuals from the actual regression line" (66). The assumption is that there is a clear boundary at which speakers stop using one form and begin using another. This assumption ignores the reality of dialect layering, overlap that obscures boundaries. Essentially, this assumption confuses the difference between a dialect and a dialect boundary. To use more traditional terms, the lack of a bundle of isoglosses does not imply the non-existence of a distinct dialect area, such as Midland. Rather than saying there is no distinct Midland dialect, all the Davis and Houck can legitimately claim is that their data reveal no significant bundles of isoglosses among a select group of eastern locations. Of course, this claim is not as sensational as the ones they make.

Second, their focus on a select group of linguistic features implies that a dialect is defined by linguistic features alone. But certainly, what people perceive to be a dialect--and let's face it, perception is as significant as reality, if it is not in fact reality--includes elements of culture, socio-economic patterns, settlement history, and geography. It was these things, in addition to features of language, that Kurath took into consideration in positing the existence of a unique Midland dialect.

Of course, it is possible to conclude that these assumptions are not problematic. Even so, there remain serious problems concerning the raw data that Davis and Houck select for their analysis. Indeed, as will become evident, the conclusions they reach are prefigured by the way their restrict their data set in the first place.

To recall, Davis and Houck say that they selected lexical items that were among those that Kurath used "to establish and reaffirm the notion of three distinct dialect areas" (62) of American English. In a sense this is true, for the items they examine are among the unique sets defining Northern and Southern dialects of American English. But it is important to note that they select *only* Northern and Southern terms for analysis. In plotting solely the distribution of Northern terms and Southern terms, one could hardly expect to find the existence of a third set, the Midland set.<sup>1</sup> To draw a fruity yet apropos analogy, their claims are rather akin to saying that there are no such things as strawberries after looking only at cherries and raspberries. What Davis and Houck overlook is that Kurath defines the Midland dialect as a unique configuration of terms that are completely different from what Davis and Houck study. Kurath does acknowledge that "the Midland is not a uniform speech area, but it has a considerable body of words that sets it off from the North and the South" (1949: 27). Further he states, "The expressions that characterize the Midland as a whole and set it off from the North and the South

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<sup>1</sup>It is possible that the third set is defined in terms of the overlap between the first two sets. But Davis and Houck provide no information on the frequency and percentage of both Northern and Southern terms in each of the ostensibly Midland communities to allow for any determination of this sort. In fact, a chief flaw in their study is the failure to provide any frequency data upon which they claim their interpretations are based.

largely belong to the sphere of the house and the farm" (1949: 28). This unique set includes the following lexical items: *blinds*; *skiller*; *spouts, spouting*; *(little) piece*; *to hull*; *(arm) load*; *snake feeder*; *sook!*; *bawl*; *want off*; and *quarter till*. In each case, there are clear contrasts between these Midland terms and other lexical items commonly used in the North and South. For instance, whereas Midlanders call a dragon fly a *snake feeder*, Northerners call it a *darning needle* and Southerners say *mosquito hawk* or *snake doctor*. Limitations of space make it impossible to reproduce Kurath's figures here, but a quick glimpse at the maps in *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* that contain these items clearly show area distributions that warrant calling Midland a distinct area.

In having failed to consider what Kurath identifies as the defining features of the Midland dialect region, Davis and Houck's conclusions are meaningless, moot at best. In fact, it is rather irresponsible scholarship to claim that something does not exist without even looking at that which defines its existence. They are quite right when they conclude that "None of the features we examined is uniquely Midland" (1992: 68). But Kurath never said they were. One expects, however, that if the statistical wizardry of Davis and Houck were applied to the set of features listed above the results would be far different.

#### REFERENCES

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