Overview of accent variation in the USA
Readings

• Ladefoged ‘A Course in Phonetics’, chapter 8
Describing English accents – Wells’s Lexical Sets

• Northern /u/ and Californian /ʉ/ are corresponding vowels in the two accents because they generally occur in the same words, e.g. who [hu], [hʉ]

• So a convenient way to refer to vowel phonemes in describing accents is in terms of the words in which they appear.

• Wells (1982) proposes a set of keywords for referring to classes of words that (generally) share a vowel phoneme, e.g.
  – KIT, DRESS, TRAP, LOT, STRUT, etc.

• Note that this abstracts away from allophonic variation and contextual neutralization.

• It is an interesting fact that accents correspond in this way – what does it tell us about the nature of language change?
Describing English accents - an historical approach

Language change is a basic source of synchronic variation.

• A language change cannot occur simultaneously in the speech of all individuals in all places, so change inevitably gives rise to variation.

• Geographical variation: Even if we start from a uniform language, if different changes apply in different geographical areas, then we end up with geographical variation.

• Labov takes an explicitly historical approach to description of accents.
  – accents are described in terms of changes from an ‘initial position’ - Āour best estimation of the common base for American English dialects which resulted from the mixing of various English dialects in the 16th and 17th centuries
Labov et al – vowel classes


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>nucleus</th>
<th>SHORT</th>
<th>LONG</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>front</td>
<td>back</td>
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<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>u</td>
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<tr>
<td>mid</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>æ</td>
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<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>æe</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Short vowels are represented by single vowels
  - /o/ is usually [ɑ], generally from Middle English short /o/, not phonetically short in modern American dialects.
- High front offglides are generically transcribed as /y/, high back offglides as /w/
- /Vh/ indicates length or a central ‘offglide’ [ə]
Regional accents in the USA

- Labov et al (2006) divide the USA into major dialect regions, grouped by distinctive combinations of shared sound changes - often sound changes in progress.

North

North Central

Inland North

Canada

West

Midland

South

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The West

The West is primarily characterized by three characteristics:

- **Cot-caught merger**: /a/, no /ɔ/  
  - Spreading East through the midlands.
- Fronting of GOOSE vowel to [ʉ] (similar change in the South and elsewhere. Not in North)
- GOAT vowel is unfronted [ou]  
  - cf. The South which has fronting of GOOSE and GOAT vowels (/uw, ow/).
The North

- Generally retains ‘conservative’ long /i, eɪ, u, ou/
- Inland North characterized by a **chain shift**, primarily involving historically lax vowels - Northern Cities Shift.
  - Change in progress, most advanced in major cities (Buffalo, Rochester, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Madison etc).
Northern Cities Shift

• Chain shift: a series of connected sound changes. Can result in wholesale rotations of portions of the vowel system.
  – Why do we observe chainshifts?

• Earliest stages:
  • fronting of LOT/PALM α > a
    Buffalo  Chicago  Kenosha
  • tensing of TRAP æ > eæ/ɪɛ
    Buffalo  Chicago  Detroit

• More recent developments:
  • THOUGHT lowering/unrounding
    • ɔ > ɑ
      Rochester
  • STRUT /ʌ/ backing
  • HEAD /ɛ/ backing

The Northern Cities Shift

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The North

- Much of the North and North Central region is also characterized by ‘Canadian Raising’

- Usually written:  
  /ai/ → ʌi /_ [-voice]  
  /au/ → ʌʊ /_ [-voice]

Sound samples from [http://www.yorku.ca/twainweb/troberts/raising.html](http://www.yorku.ca/twainweb/troberts/raising.html). © Taylor Roberts. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see [https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/](https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/).

- LOT/PALM and THOUGHT are merged in the North Central dialect, but not in the North (cot-caught merger).
The South

• The South is characterized by another series of vowel shifts, referred to as ‘the Southern Shift’, but it’s not clear to me why all the changes should be regarded as part of a single ‘chain’.

Figure 3. The Southern Shift

Figure from https://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/NationalMap/NationalMap.html. © William Labov, Sharon Ash, and Charles Boberg. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.
The South

- One of the oldest Southern developments is PRICE monophthongization
  - $\text{ai} > \text{a:} (\text{/}_{-\text{voice}})$ Texas ("the longest time" at 1:35)

- GOOSE /u/ fronting Alabama ("goose" at 0:50)

- GOAT /$\text{oʊ}$/ > [əʊ] Alabama ("goat" at 1:04)

- THOUGHT /$\text{ɔ}$/ raising/diphthongization
  - Texas ("taught" at 3:55), Alabama ("dog" at 1:05)

- Variably (or contextually) rhotic
  - Alabama ("form" at 0:58, "her" at 0:30, "morning" at 0:34)

- Lax front vowels have central offglides in some contexts
  Sometimes ‘break’ into two vowels separated by a glide
  Texas ("copy of this" at 0:57, "Bass" at 3:11)
  Alabama ("stressed" at 0:36)
The Midlands

• Not very uniform. Primarily characterized by Labov as not participating in Northern Cities or Southern shifts.
• Some Southern features, e.g. fronting of GOAT nucleus [əʊ], but not PRICE monophthongization.
• *cot-caught* merger is spreading in this region.

• This is obviously a very broad characterization
  – many small areas have distinctive accents that do not fit this classification (New York City, Philadelphia, Eastern New England etc).
  – Does not incorporate cultural variation within regions, e.g. African American Vernacular English.
  – Treats most sound changes as context-free.
Eastern Massachusetts

- The Boston accent.
- Non-rhotic 🎥 🎥 🎥
Eastern Massachusetts

- The Boston accent.
- Non-rhotic
- Non-rhotic and variably rhotic accents are primarily found in E. New England, NYC, coastal plain of the South.
  - But these areas also contain pockets of continuous rhoticity.
- This patterns seems to have resulted because r-loss spread from Southern England along trade routes to major ports of the Eastern seaboard, and then to surrounding areas.
- Non-rhotic accents used to be locally prestigious, but have largely lost their prestige and are in retreat.
Eastern Massachusetts

• Post-vocalic /ɹ/ in many contexts is better thought of as vocalized (de-rhotacized) rather than simply deleted.
• Many historical vowel-r sequences are now diphthongs.
  – floor [ɔː] (=/əʔ/)  horse [ɔː]
  – hoarse [ʊə]
    • This contrast has been lost in many UK and US accents.
  – NEAR [iə]
  – SQUARE [ɛə]
Eastern Massachusetts

Some unusual features

- Neutralization of LOT/ɒ/-THOUGHT/ɔ/ to /ɒa/
  - Boston cot caught hot
- PALM remains distinct, but fronted /a/ (la-law, pa-paw)
  - car spa
- Contrast between three front lax vowels before /ɹ/
  - Mary-merry-marry

Mary ɪɛ ɛɛ (fairy, hairy vs. Carey)
merry ɛ ɛɛ
marry æ ɛæ (carry, Harold vs. marry, Barry)