What is the Southern accent? Where did it come from? Why are we calling it Southern American English? All this and more are answered in this installment of the United States of Accents.

By THOMAS MOORE DEVLIN

You probably have an idea of what a Southern accent sounds like. Southerners have a drawl, they say "y'all" and maybe even "howdy." Surely not everyone in the South talks this way, but most of us are aware of the fact that Southerners don’t speak the same way as Northerners.

But what is the Southern accent? You may have heard it a hundred times, but not really know what it is or where it comes from. It’s a pretty complicated story, but it reveals the massive amount of accent diversity that exists in even just a small part of the United States.

Southern accents, like most accents, are bogged down by media myths. Whether you associate them with the Civil War or rednecks, there are some pretty harmful stereotypes that come with the accent, which we’ll go into more later. To help jog you out of these associations, we’ll refer to this way of speaking with a more technical term: Southern American English.

What's Considered the South?

Who really knows? It's exceedingly difficult to pin down the regional boundaries. There is no official marking of where the South starts and ends. We could use the Mason-Dixon line, but that's pretty arbitrary this many years after the Civil War.

To create a linguistic definition of the South, one of the best metrics to use is the pin-pen merger. The "merging" in this case occurs in the pronunciation of the vowel in "pin" and "pen." In some parts of the United States, it's pronounced the same. More specifically, they now both sound like "pin." You can imagine the confusion that sometimes arises when someone asks for "that pen over there." This is a small aspect of how people speak, but the regions that observe the merger match pretty closely with the academically accepted "Linguistic South."

Where does Southern English come from?

SAE naturally developed over the past few hundred years, which was a process involving a huge number of contributing factors. Immigration, slavery, westward expansion and the growth of cities have all had an effect on how people talk. The best we can really do is look at what led the South to become so distinct from the North, speaking-wise. We can trace some of these roots back to the United Kingdom.

The British are famous for not pronouncing "r"s. While it seems like they've always talked this way, it wasn't until the mid-18th century that the rich British started losing their "r"s as a class marker. As the British kept trading with the Americans for at least a few more decades, they brought their lack of "r"s with them. This is the reason why even today, the major port cities like Boston and New York City have "r"-less accents ("Pahk the cah" and so forth).
Other parts of the United Kingdom, to the west and north of London, did and still do pronounce "r"s. These regions of England were not as prosperous as the capital, so they tended to move not to cities, but to agricultural areas in the South. Because they didn't move to trading ports, they didn't have any contact with the wealthy "r"-less folk. Southern American English, then, comes from Northern England. At least, that's a major contributing factor.

Southerners don't sound particularly cockney anymore, which is a side effect of a few centuries of isolation and other outside influences. So as not to generalize, there are also areas of the South that sound distinctly Southern, but don't pronounce any "r"s. It would take a long time to explain how the accent formed feature by feature, but these old immigration patterns go a long way in showing why the United States has such distinct differences in speech.

Is There Only One Southern American English

Most Americans have a hard time telling apart people from various areas of the South. Heck, actual Southerners may have trouble knowing if a person comes from Atlanta, Memphis or Montgomery. But like all accents, there's lots of variety.

There's a sharp linguistic difference between cities and rural areas in the South. Cities are a major hotspot of linguistic innovation, but they can also lead to accent loss. Because Southern American English is stigmatized by cosmopolitan people, people who live in cities and travel the country will often try to "lose" their accent. While this isn't everyone, it's caused cities to sound distinctly more northern than rural parts. A study done on Raleigh, North Carolina, shows the city's trend toward a less Southern, more General American way of talking. Then, there's just the fact that the South is a huge area. Even if you can't articulate the discrepancies, people definitely sound different depending on the region they're from. A perfect example of this comes from two of our most recent Southern presidents.

President Jimmy Carter, from Plains, Georgia, doesn't pronounce any "r"s. From the mere sound of it, you can tell that his accent encompasses numerous features of Southern American English, but you can hear that he pronounces words like "years" as yee-uhs. Generally, this variety of SAE is considered the more "educated-sounding," likely because it shares more in common with the upper classes in England. He inherited his accent from his family, which ran a successful peanut farm.

President George W. Bush, who grew up in various places around Texas, also has the Southern American Accent, but it's noticeably different. Bush definitely pronounces his "r"s, and his accent is a lot closer to the "typical" Southern accent that shows up in movies and on television. There's a distinct reason that Bush is often called a "cowboy" while Carter is not. Bush was born into a strongly political family, but his accent has remained strong, signifying that he's "down to earth."
What Are Some Characteristics Of Southern American English?

Variation aside, there are some features of SAE that give it a distinctively cohesive sound. We've mentioned the pin-pen merger and the use (sometimes) of "r"s, so here are just a few more:

- **The Drawl.** What most people call the "Southern drawl" has to do with the length of the vowels. What often happens is the vowel will be diphthongized, meaning it's split into two syllables. You'll hear this in lots of words, like "here" as hee-yur or "red" as ray-ehd. Think Tom Hanks in Forrest Gump.

- **The "I" Sound.** While some vowels are diphthongized, at least one is monophthongized: the "I." Instead of pronouncing it ah-ee (you might think that's not what "I" sounds like, but try pronouncing "I" really slowly), they'll shorten it to just ah. So it will be mah for "my" and hah for "hi."

- **Word Stress.** A noticeable feature among some Southerners is that they put the stress on different syllables in words. "Guitar" will be pronounced GEE-tahr and "police" POH-leeess.

Not every person that has the accent uses all of these features, but each of them index the dialect. Again, this is a very small sampling, and there is certainly a lot of Southern slang vocab that could be added.

What Do People Think About The Southern Accent?

As a Northerner, I could proselytize about the attitudes toward SAE, and I could link to studies that show bias, or link to movie clips that show how Southerners are often stereotyped. Instead, I talked to a few actual Southerners to get their perspectives on the way they speak.

Katie Shane, who's from Tampa, Florida, and has also lived in Alabama and North Carolina, said that for a long time, she didn't even realize she had an accent.

"My mother has a very strong accent and people ask her all the time where she is from," Shane said. "I didn't know I had picked up an accent until I went to school at New York University and people starting commenting on my accent."

Shane said her accent really isn't that noticeable, and that many people liked the "genteel" quality to it, but that people still often pointed it out.

"I think words with strong 'I' sounds are where you can hear it the most," Shane said. "People often tell me that they can't understand my accent. I had a boyfriend who said that the moment I started speaking to my mom on the phone, he couldn't understand a word I was saying because my accent would come back in full force."

Shawn Paik, who grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee, said he thinks that despite negative stereotypes, SAE is really on the rise in the United States.

"Southern accents have always been a foundational source of American culture and linguistics, but I have certainly seen a rise in its popularity in recent years," Paik said. "Southern cities like Atlanta, Nashville and Charlotte have been undeniably on the upswing, and so has the language."
Still, those stereotypes have stuck around. Mackenzie Cash, a native of Alabama, notes that the stereotypes of SAE are kind of a backhanded compliment. For many, SAE is sweet and kind, but this kindness is seen as a result of the person being kind of simple, or stupid. Because of that, she’s felt the need to erase her accent. Recently, she’s started to have a better relationship with her speech.

“When I was in California, I felt very self-conscious and insecure about sounding Southern,” Cash said. “It came back up a little when I first moved to New York and didn’t want anyone to necessarily know where I was from as soon as I opened my mouth. After graduating, I noticed that people were disappointed when they learned where I was from and that I didn’t have an accent. That, and improving my relationship with all the quirks of the South has let me embrace it a little more, because having a slight twang isn’t something to be ashamed of.”

Thomas grew up in suburban Massachusetts, and moved to New York City for college. He studied English literature and linguistics at New York University, but spent most of his time in college working for the student paper. Because of this, he has really hard opinions about AP Style. In his spare time, he enjoys reading and getting angry about things on Twitter. He’s spent a lot of time trying to learn Spanish, and has learned a little German.