

Representation of the American South and its Dialect in Popular Media

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Abstract

This thesis is an interdisciplinary study that integrates historical, sociocultural, and sociolinguistic analyses to illuminate the role that the media representation of the American South and its speech play in shaping and perpetuating stereotypes, particularly dialect-based stereotypes of white Southerners. First, the study examines how the North and South constructed and defined one another through cultural opposition, resulting in the regional binary through which both Southerners and non-Southerners understand the South today. Next, the thesis explores dialect as the principal signifier of Southern identity and how this sociolinguistic performance is perceived within and outside the South, leading to the link between media and the perpetuation of dialect stereotypes. After surveying popular representation in different media, including cinema and television, the thesis critically examines the 2002 film *Sweet Home Alabama* as a cultural artifact to provide a detailed case study of the intersection of performative language, regional identity, and personal expression.

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Introduction

Though a native of Nashville, Tennessee, I consciously avoided having a “Southern accent” from when I was as young as six or seven years old. I tried to have a “neutral” accent so people would not think I was “dumb.” Upon deeper introspection, I realized I was altering my speech and mannerisms to separate myself from having a perceptible Southern identity at all. I only gained an appreciation for my roots, finding comfort in Southern dialects and culture, when I moved abroad in 2022. Gradually, gingerly, I began reintegrating Southern dialect features into my speech. Even after reevaluating my origins, I hesitated to “talk Southern” to other Americans due to the simple fact that my dialect, and by extension my regional identity, are inextricably linked to troubling cultural and sociopolitical implications.

My story is not unique among Southerners of my generation; many friends have told me they feel the same linguistic insecurity and have decided to eradicate any trace of a Southern accent in their speech since childhood to avoid association with regional stereotypes. For others, their Southern dialect represents more than a personal source of shame; it is an unavoidable obstacle to professional success and a hurdle to gaining respect in the workplace and academia.

These observations led me to wonder where the present stigma comes from. I wondered how the various dialect-based stereotypes of white Southern speech developed and how they are perpetuated today. More broadly, what is the South, what is a “Southern accent,” and what is the function of these concepts in relation to the larger identity of the nation? I thought of popular media as an effective vehicle for transmitting these stereotypes, especially from one generation to the next. But what role have different types

of media played in creating and perpetuating degrading stereotypes in American popular culture? What implications does that stigma have on the perception of dialect in the American South?

My questions inevitably led me to take an interdisciplinary approach, drawing insights from academic fields including history, sociolinguistics, and media analysis. I interwove the interpretive frameworks of history and the analytical methods of sociolinguistics to interpret the production of relevant cultural artifacts and their political functions and consequences in America today. The result is a historically contextualized sociolinguistic analysis of popular culture that seeks to examine the imaginative conceptualization of a region called the South and the impact of this conception on Southerners who feel compelled to either identify or disidentify as Southern.

This thesis is divided into four major sections. First, I seek to define the region known as the South. This lays the geographical and historical foundation for the linguistic and cultural discussion in the later sections.

Second, building on the historical context, I explore dialect's role in constructing and performing Southern identity. Through a perceptual dialectology lens, I analyze how Southerners perceive themselves and their dialect as compared to non-Southern perceptions and stereotypes of the region. I, then, outline the major features of white Southern variations that set them apart from the hypothetical "standard" American English that can then be compared to the popular perceptions of "Southern accents" in the media.

With an established understanding of the relationship between Southern identity and dialect, I turn the discussion to the representation of the South in popular media.

Beginning with the history of Reconstruction and following dialect through film, television, and stand-up comedy, I trace changes in how the South, including recognizably Southern speech, is portrayed and what it represents in the national imagination.

Finally, I analyze the 2002 film *Sweet Home Alabama* as a cultural artifact through an interdisciplinary lens, contextualizing the film's message about language and identity into the historical, sociocultural, political, and sociolinguistic tapestry presented in this thesis. Through Melanie's journey of identity reclamation, the film invites the audience to consider whether a Southerner can redefine herself outside the supposed North/South binary, exploring the relationship between dialect, region, and personal identity.

Defining the South

Setting the stage for the linguistic discussion ahead requires defining the South as it has been understood since the antebellum period and the Civil War. The existence of such a tangible region is assumed by most of the nation. But where exactly are the South's borders? What are its defining features? No two Americans will offer identical answers to these questions. As Lippi-Green (2012) argued, mapping the South has always been a political project (p. 214). The geographic borders of the South are, for example, shifting and malleable. The borders delineating the South depend on who draws them and on which facet of Southern identity is being mapped. It might be tempting to equate the South with the former Confederate States; however, as Southern historian Edward Ayers (1996) explained, "The South and the Confederacy covered the same territory and shared

a critical part of history, but they have never been synonymous, not even between 1861 and 1865” (p. 79).

The image below, taken from Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent* (2012), illustrates how the US Census Bureau currently identifies the South's geographic borders.

Figure 1

Map of the South according to the US Census Bureau



Note: From English with an accent: language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States by R. Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 215.

Illustrating Ayers' observation, the Census Bureau map includes the border states of Kentucky, West Virginia, Delaware, and Maryland but positions Missouri and its slaveholding history and Confederate sympathies outside the South's imagined borders. Most maps of the South follow the Census Bureau's template, though Florida's and

Oklahoma’s inclusion in the region continue to be debated. Florida’s distinctive features and Hispanic population distinguish it from the general cultural and historical identity that characterizes the South. Others argue whether Oklahoma is Southern or Mid-Western. While its indigenous population was pulled into the Civil War, Oklahoma remained “Indian territory” until the early twentieth century.

Within the Census Bureau map is the “Southern Trough” or “Deep South,” a subregion within the South that proves equally nebulous to define. Figure 2 depicts one interpretation of the Deep South.

Figure 2

Map of the Deep South



Note: From “Which States are Considered the Deep South?” by Kiprof V., 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/which-states-are-considered-the-deep-south.html>

Kiprof (2019) defined the Deep South as Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina, but clarified that some maps include Texas and North Florida due to

those states' participation in the secession from the Union to form the Confederate States of America. Regardless of which specific states are included, most Americans consistently regard the Deep South as the locus of negative Southern stereotypes due to assumptions about these states' history, ideological affinities, and cultural features such as lifestyle and accent (Lippi-Green, 2012).

If defined from a historical perspective, "the South" is a construct that exists and functions only in contrast to an imagined "North" (Ayers, 1996; Prince, 2014; Watts, 2010). As historian Edward Ayers (1996) explains, "When the South is portrayed as a 'culture' or 'society,' even a 'civilization,' that stands as the binary opposite of the North, a relative situation tends to become an absolute characteristic; Southern differences with the North are transformed into traits that mark the very soul of the Southern people" (p. 65). For Ayers (1996), the reciprocal and inseparable constitution of these regions is intentional: "People realize that when they speak of 'Southern culture' they are creating a fiction, a fiction of a geographically bounded and coherent set of attributes to be set off against a mythical non-South" (p. 65). In this way, "The North and the South have conspired to create each other's identity as well as their own" (Ayers, 1996, p. 66). Only through imagined contrasts, then, do the North and the South come into being as distinct regions, but the construction of this binary has produced inherently political and unequal consequences. For Ayers, these include the production of "generalizations that trivialize [the South], whether those generalizations take the form of romantic and nostalgic dreams of the past, arrogant regional stereotypes, or scholarly arguments about central themes and unifying characteristics" (1996, p. 64). Regardless of their intent, the

homogenizing effects of these characterizations “keep us from seeing the people of the region with the fullness of empathy all people deserve” (Ayers, 1996, p. 64).

This binary construction of the North and the South has a long history. The belief that the South has a distinctive culture apart from the rest of the States has been a “cornerstone of southern (and American) identity for much of the nation’s history” (Prince, 2014 p. 8; Watts, 2010). Perceptions of the South’s “peculiar” regional identity have been, however, entwined with other categories of experience and identity such as race, gender, and class (Prince, 2014, p. 5). According to Ayers (1996), English ancestry also played a role in shaping the identity of white Southerners. He asserted that, unlike their Northern counterparts, white Southerners clung to the perception that they represented “a particular strain of British culture” (p. 74). The social structure of the South and many of its defining features, including gentility, social hierarchy, and even slavery, were borrowed from England, reflecting colonists’ efforts to replicate “the best ideals of European, especially English, dominion” (p. 75). As Northerners began to take issue with slavery after the American Revolution, “The white South charged that it was the North that was changing” (p. 75). Ayers continued:

White Southerners, finding themselves on the defensive, quickly began doing something they had not done before, namely, to assemble, entirely from materials available in the larger Anglo-American culture, a picture of themselves as a distinctive people with a separate history, culture, and destiny. (p. 76)

White Southerners thus suppressed divisive socioeconomic and political differences to create a common identity and mythology. This unifying perception helps to explain the politics of secession, for as Ayers (1996) concluded, “The Confederacy did not think of

itself as something new, a dangerous experiment, but as the natural embodiment of something well established” (p. 77).

The Civil War only strengthened this perception that the South embodied and preserved the nation’s history and founding values. After the Civil War, Northern politicians and reformers eagerly endeavored to “save” the South by remaking the region in the image of a more modern and industrial North. Having lost the military battle, white Southerners turned to an alternative strategy to defend themselves from Northern conquest: propaganda via the arts. Prince (2014) joins many scholars in arguing that the development of a “postwar southern identity was, in large measure, constructed in the North” due to Southerners’ efforts to counter “the power of northern public opinion (pp. 3-4). Prince’s work, *Stories of the South*, examined the role popular media played in reshaping Southern identity during Reconstruction:

Reconstruction was, in part, an attempt to create in the South a society more closely aligned with northern values and expectations. Over time, however, conservative white southerners came to recognize the value of a well-told story. In the years after 1877, the white South began to construct visions of their region expressly for northern consumption. (Prince, 2014, pp. 4-5)

The “white South” that Prince identifies comprised a collection of diverse actors who engaged in multiple forms of political and cultural production. The United Daughters of the Confederacy focused on commemorating Civil War soldiers and influencing the adoption of textbooks that presented a pro-Confederate account of slavery and the Civil War (Watts, 2010). New South business leaders similarly embraced this “Lost Cause” mythology to graft economic modernization onto the South’s history of white supremacy.

Already popular in the North, minstrelsy translated historical myths and political propaganda into racist caricatures that lampooned the Black freedom struggle. Regional literature also spread these misconceptions northward, and Thomas Dixon's *The Clansmen* came to life in movie theaters throughout the country in the blockbuster film *A Birth of a Nation*. Together, this combination of political, educational, and cultural propaganda helped construct a homogenous white Southern identity distinct from, and perhaps even superior to, the rest of the country (Baker, 2007; Prince, 2014; Sodl, 2023; Watts, 2010).

Due to the binary conceptualization of North and South, Southerners' claims to national authenticity and regional superiority have been hotly contested. Regardless of its geographic mapping, the South is often viewed in the North as the most racist, backward, and uneducated region of the United States, largely "untouched" and "unchanged" by the progressive values and practices that accompany modernization and urbanization. One perception survey by Gould and White in 1992 demonstrated, for example, that many Northerners and Midwesterners view the Southern Trough as the least desirable place to live in the United States (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 217). Such attitudes reflect that the South remains in the Northern imagination "a vast saucer of unpleasant associations" (Ayers, 1996, p. 69).

This contest over the South's value within the nation reflects a persistent ambivalence about the history of slavery and its ongoing impacts. In the late nineteenth century, former Confederates spun a "Myth of the Lost Cause" to deny the violence of chattel slavery, obscure slavery's centrality in causing the war, and redeem their military defeat by the federal government. This fabricated narrative became, however, a strategy

for national reconciliation in the late nineteenth century as the Myth of the Lost Cause was widely accepted throughout the country as a historical fact. Following the legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement, Lost Cause mythology took on a new function by positioning legal discrimination and white supremacy in a regionally specific history that the nation had finally overcome. A region once romanticized was consequently pathologized as the source of the nation's moral and ideological failings. In contrast to the Southern perpetrators of Jim Crow discrimination, white Northerners reclaimed the moral high ground of the Civil War by representing "themselves as the chosen, the redeemed, the real nation" (Ayers, 1996, p. 79). Like abolition, Ayers continued, the Civil Rights Movement became "an emblem of a larger national destiny and freedom" (p.79). Southerners charged their regional rivals with hypocrisy, citing the historical complicity of Northerners in state-sponsored slavery (Albakry & Williams, 2016) and the persistence of racial inequality in northern and western states. The moral boundaries between the North and the South nevertheless remained firmly drawn, serving "to sanctify the North and the West and to make the South a sink of iniquity, a focus and explanation for what is lacking in the country in general" (Ayers, 1996, pp.79-80).

With the history and residue of white supremacy presumably confined to only one region, the South became a scapegoat that enabled the nation to remain a beacon of morality, democracy, and progress for the world. As a result of the South's function to produce a linear and progressive narrative of U.S. history, "Americans believe, hope the South is different and so tend to look for differences to confirm that belief, that 'knowledge'" (Ayers, 1996, p. 66). Creating the South as a static and discrete object of knowledge—a region "set apart as a distinct place that has certain fundamental

characteristics” -- reflects that “[t]he South plays a key role in the nation’s self-image: the role of evil tendencies overcome, mistakes atoned for, progress yet to be made” (p. 66). This conflict between the romantic fantasy of gentility and the pathology of white supremacy has continued to evolve in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. Tracing this progression, Ayers (1996) observed, “The South eagerly defines itself against the North, advertising itself as more earthy, more devoted to family values, more spiritual, and then is furious to have things turned around, to hear itself called hick, phony, and superstitious.” It has been through this process of self-definition, Ayers concluded, that “[t]he South feeds the sense of difference and then resents the consequences” (p. 66).

Language and Southern Identity

While cartography and history have served to demarcate the South in both imagined space and time, these fabricated boundaries and histories fail to capture the regional identity of the South in its entirety. Integral to the performative existence of “the South” is a recognizable Southern dialect. An estimated 30% of US citizens speak a dialect of American English widely perceived as “Southern,” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 222). While the underlying assumption is that all (white) Southerners speak the same dialect, the findings of regional dialectology, or even a non-linguist’s brief visit to the region itself, are enough to debunk this myth. Additionally, dialect perception surveys challenge the assumption of dialectical uniformity by indicating that demographic groups differ when drawing borders around the South based on clips of recorded speech (Lippi-Green, 2012). Such perceptual differences suggest that neither the phonetic nor cultural borders of the region are as distinct or fixed as generally imagined.

In reality, the South has the most linguistic variety of any region of the United States (Montgomery & Johnson, 2007, p. 1). Montgomery and Johnson (2007) find that both popular and scholarly accounts “have regrettably obscured the diversity of speech within the region by contrasting a generalized ‘Southern English’ with ‘General American English’ or ‘Standard English’” (p. 1). Linguists recognize that conceptions of a “general” or “standard” American English are “abstract, even hypothetical entities never described and certainly not homogeneous” (p. 1). Nevertheless, from a perceptual dialectology perspective, the presumption of a “neutral” and “correct” dialect holds immense power in the public's minds and must be carefully examined. The perceived dichotomy between Southern and standard English both reflects and reinforces the cultural myth that the South and its inhabitants possess a distinct identity that differs from a universalizing norm that characterizes the rest of the nation and its citizens.

Performing Identity Through Dialect

Dialect is fundamental in a monolingual environment like the English-speaking United States to the process of cordoning off the South as a region whose difference defines the boundaries of a liberal nation. This “othering” strategy illuminates how dialect, as a widely recognized signifier of Southern difference, provides crucial support to a nationalist myth of linear progress. The belief that the United States has advanced beyond its pre-Civil Rights history of illiberalism has entailed stigmatizing a Southern accent. In the absence of other ethnic or phenotypic markers of difference, Lippi-Green (2012) explains, language provides “a simple and effective way of distinguishing between self and other” with the effect of enabling Northern selves “to escape criticism for what would otherwise be seen as narrow-mindedness” (p. 228). Ayers (1996) confirms the findings of sociolinguists by noting that “[a]ccent is the closest attribute

white Southerners have to a physical marker to separate them from other white Americans,” becoming the target vehicle for stigmatization (p. 71).

Inseparable from constructing the disparate histories and identities of the North and South, perceived dialectical differences have evolved in relation to the political conflict over each region's relative meaning and value. This evolution illuminates an assumption that language enacts a free citizen's fundamental ability to choose. Explaining this analogy between the use of language and the right of consent, Ayers (1996) explained, “Since language seems to be partially in the speaker's control...it is often taken as the key measure of national belonging. Accent accentuates difference where there is supposed to be commonality; it testifies to an inability or unwillingness to go along, to fit in” (p. 71). The key word here is “seems;” in reality, dialect is naturally acquired from a person's environment. Style-shifting, when a person consciously or unconsciously changes their speech for different social situations, is much more nuanced than this assumption of consent and identity performance implies. When dialect is framed as a conscious choice, the assumption that a Southern accent symbolizes a “poor education, low ambition, and reactionary politics” becomes even more problematic (Ayers, 1996, p. 71). Under this lens, every speech act uttered with a perceptible “Southern accent” is reframed as a conscious identification with these stereotypical traits. Indeed, Southerners “choosing” to maintain their accent can even be perceived as an act of regional defiance in the spirit of the white South's “rebellious” history, linking the speaker with a racially charged sociopolitical group in the minds of their audience. Illustrating the performative connection of language and consent, Ayers (1996) observed that to non-Southerners, “[W]hite Southerners, with their slavery, their racism, and their attachment to the past,

seem to have brought on their own troubles” (p. 70). Ayers’ reflections speak directly to the implication that language not only expresses consent but also absolves non-Southerners of linking that language with an established collection of regional stereotypes. Due to the alleged faulty choices of its inhabitants, the South, and its dialects by extension, became “an object of fun, a sanctioned way to laugh at poverty and backwardness in a way that has been banished for every other group” (p. 70).

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu elaborates on the use of language to create relations of power. Bourdieu’s theory of condescension, as cited in Lippi-Green (2012), posits language as “a tactic whereby an empowered individual (someone with social legitimacy in terms of employment or education or language or other kinds of authority) — appropriates the subordinated language for a short period of time in order to exploit it” (pp. 223, 225). In *English with an Accent*, Lippi-Green (2012) summarized the sociocultural effect of mocking a Southern accent:

When a Northerner appropriates a pan-Southern accent to make a joke or a point, he or she is drawing on a strategy of condescension and trivialization that cues into those stereotypes so carefully structured and nurtured: Southerners who do not assimilate to Northern norms are backward but friendly, racist but polite, obsessed with the past and unenamored of the finer points of higher education. If they are women, they are sweet, pretty and not very bright. (p. 228)

Here, Lippi-Green reiterates the assumption that a detectable Southern accent signals a cultural deviant who refuses to conform to Northern (often interchangeable with “national”) ideals. If Southerners dare to “talk different,” they link themselves to a series of detrimental stereotypes. The condescension used to produce and reinforce social

hierarchies functions in tension with Southerners' persistence in celebrating their dialect as an aesthetic, performative marker of distinction. In this system of condescension, such resistance via regional pride is flipped on its head: "The people who show their allegiance to home and region by means of language are expected to understand that they are subordinate, intellectually and culturally, to their neighbors" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 225).

How do white Southerners respond to this sociolinguistic hierarchy? Most speakers react in one of three ways: amplify and exaggerate one's dialect in protest, engage in self-deprecating jokes or comparative ridicule of other parts of the South to deflect the derision, or erase one's accent completely and thus any perceptible association with the region's faults (Ayers, 1996; Faegin, 2007; Lippi-green, 2012).

On the one hand, the consciousness of dialect is linked to regional loyalty (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 219). In Faegin's (2007) analysis of the Southern drawl, he argues that one function of the drawl is to engender communal solidarity, encompassing the formation and performance of identity (p. 193). Lippi-Green (2012) concurs that "southerners see language distinctions as important" not only to their identities as Southerners but also to their fealty to the region (pp. 219-220, p. 225). Language thus signifies a loyalty to place that animates the dialectical performativity of Southern identity. A 1995 study by the Applied Research Center at Georgia State University, as cited by Lippi-Green (2012), found a strong correlation between Georgians who claimed to have a strong Southern accent and those who identified Southern stereotypes as true to their daily lifestyle (pp. 219-220). Even the ability to conduct such a survey testifies to the powerful hold dialectal and regional identity has over Southerners. It would be

difficult to construct a similar sociolinguistic survey covering the North or Midwest. Feagin (2007) observed that when some Southerners leave the region, they “not only maintain [the drawl] but perfect it, polish it, and exaggerate it to make sure that their identity as southerners is clear to all” (p. 193)¹.

Another response some Southerners have is to chime into the national ridicule with self-deprecating humor, either to distance themselves from other parts of the South they deem “worse” or to detach themselves from the South entirely. According to Bourdieu’s strategy of condescension, efforts to stigmatize accent are most effective when Southerners themselves “become actively complicit” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 225), demonstrating insecurity about their accent and showing “willingness to accept responsibility for poor communication” (p. 226). Edward Ayers (1996) pondered the apparent paradox: the South is known for strong regional pride, yet many Southerners also participate in the jokes made at their expense. Reflecting on this dilemma, Ayers suggested:

Southerners, ambivalent about their place in the nation, tell the jokes about their fellow Southerners as a way of inoculating themselves against the same jokes being told against them. Like a member of a ‘true’ ethnic group, a white Southerner is expected to be conscious of his or her regional identity—not fanatical but not indifferent. To be fanatical is to be sadly wedded to a lost cause; to ignore it is to pretend to be something one is not. The line between the two is a fine one. (p. 71)

¹ Some scholars capitalize “south,” “southern,” and “southerner” while others do not. For this thesis, I chose to capitalize these terms except when they appear without capitalization in cited material.

Southerners—especially younger generations—must negotiate the fine line between belonging to a region defined by its past and participating equally in a modernizing nation of the future. To be accepted in the national collective, Southerners often feel the need to pathologize their own origins, proving their dissociation from the region to the public through speech.

Finally, some Southerners attempt to erase their accent entirely. Faegin (2007) observed that some Southerners who leave the South “jettison all vestiges of southern speech—especially the drawl” (p. 193). Even within the South, many feel pressured to leave their accent behind or else face prejudice in professional spaces. Because of this stigma, a shift began several decades ago in which parents began trying to erase their children’s Southern accents (Montgomery & Johnson, 2007). Accent reduction courses to help Southerners learn “standard” English remain popular in many Southern states despite controversy and local outrage (Lippi-Green, 2012). Indeed, when I start to explain my thesis topic, the most common response from friends and strangers alike is that they, too, have learned to affect a “neutral” accent to be taken seriously in their workplace. Whether exaggerated, ridiculed, or erased, Southerners’ dialect possesses a signifying power that demonstrates the pivotal role that language plays in Southern identity, both in the South and outside it.

Features of White Southern Speech

Historical Development

Despite the diversity of Southern dialects and the mythical conception of “standard English,” most Southern dialects do have features that distinguish them from what linguists have described as General North American English (GNAE). The history

of the South helps to explain the region's distinctive arrangement of accents and dialectics, particularly patterns of early settlement and the impact of slavery. Despite these demographic and historical factors, Montgomery and Johnson (2007) underscore the persistence of "folk notions" in explaining the characterizing features of Southern dialects. These "refer vaguely to a 'drawl' or 'twang' and attribute it to the influence of the hot climate, the slower pace of life, or similar factors" (p. 3). Challenging these unsupportable claims, Montgomery and Johnson (2007) point to the more "mundane realms of history, demography, and social factors, on one hand, and in the realm of psychology—in the consciousness of the region's people—on the other" (p. 3).

In mapping the "Language in the South," Montgomery and Johnson (2007) identify upper and lower sub-regions based on the history of their settlements. The lower South, consisting of the Deep South and the coastal areas, had its origins in migration from southern England. The early inhabitants of the Upper South, consisting of the upland South and South Midland, migrated primarily from Scotland, northern England, and Ulster, a northern province of Ireland. These Ulster migrants were termed the Scotch-Irish, and this distinctive group became associated with Appalachia. Nevertheless, the accents that crossed the Atlantic mixed with other local accents upon arrival, ensuring that "no type of English came to American shores without almost immediate change" (Montgomery & Johnson, 2007, p.11). Moreover, all lower and upper South dialects were impacted by their contact with the dozens of African languages and Caribbean creoles spoken by enslaved persons (Bernstein et al., 2014). Despite these natural changes, Southern dialects preserved many elements of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British English, even as these features declined

in the mother country and other parts of its North American empire (Montgomery & Johnson, 2007).

The Civil War amplified the distinctiveness of Southern speech patterns. The period of Reconstruction “intensified the region’s dialect identity, so much so that some scholars argue that Southern English as we now know it... developed mainly after the Civil War” (Montgomery & Johnson, 2007, p. 6). As already discussed in the section *Defining the South* on pages 7-9, the war’s aftermath led former Confederates to assert their social and political differences from the “radical” Republicans intent on remaking the South into an interracial democracy. The industrialization and urbanization that followed the Civil War also initiated extensive changes in Southern speech. Lower South dialects came to hold more prestige as cities such as Charleston and Richmond grew into “centers of wealth, power, and the social elite” (Montgomery & Johnson, 2007, p. 17). Later, this apparent prestige shifted further north due to the “increasing dominance of Upper South speakers and of former lower- and middle-class speakers who have climbed the social ladder” (p. 17). Even in the Lower South, younger generations now tend to adopt Upper South speech patterns, causing the linguistic patterns associated with the Upper South’s more affluent urban centers to eclipse the traditional dialectic of the Lower South.

Morphosyntax

Several distinctive markers characterize a Southern variation. The first is morphosyntax. According to Hazen (2022), “Since the origin of the English language, the verb *be* has been subject to more variation and more types of variation than any other verb” (pt. 4.1). The migration of the Scotch-Irish in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries immigrants contributed most significantly to this variability of Southern speech, especially in Appalachia (Hazen, 2022). In standard usage, the traditional progressive *be* expresses an action in the present moment. The sentence “She is singing” illustrates this conjugation. In contrast, the Southern vernacular transforms the usage of *be* into the habitual action, “She be singing all the time.” Another variation of *be* involves leveling the infinitive’s past tense. In a negative sentence, for example, *be* becomes *weren’t* as in “He weren’t there,” while in a positive sentence, *be* is leveled to *was* and paired with a plural pronoun. Resulting statements such as “We was there” defy the standardized grammatical convention of subject-verb agreement. Similarly, using non-standard *done* as an auxiliary verb adds finality to a completed action. The declaration “I done wrote the report” inserts a particularly stigmatizing perfective *done* (Hazen, 2022, pt.4.1). Even within the South, these examples of morphosyntax are associated with low socioeconomic status, literacy rates, or educational attainment, and for this reason, are frequently imitated in stereotypes of southern “hicks” and “hillbillies” (Ferriss, 2007, p. 141). The habitual *be* and perfective *done* are consequently declining in white Southern speech communities due to their class connotations (Hazen, 2022). Similarly stigmatized is the use of plural demonstrative pronouns, particularly when paired with inanimate antecedents. Phrases such as “them chairs” remain common, for example, in rural and working-class southern communities (Hazen, 2022, pt. 4.3).

Additional morphosyntactic variations associated with Southern English have spread beyond the boundaries of the imagined South. The first is double modals such as “I might should talk to him about it,” a feature shared with African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Some scholars believe double-modal constructions are becoming

increasingly normalized throughout the country, spread north by African Americans (Hazen, 2022, pt. 4.1). The contraction “y’all” also increasingly trips off the tongue of Northern speakers, as do pleonastic pronouns and idiomatic expressions such as “fixin’ to” and “bless your heart” (Lippi-Green, 2012; Montgomery & Johnson, 2007). Another recognizable feature of Southern dialect that has infiltrated standardized speech is the alveolar nasal [-n], which often replaces the velar nasal [-ŋ] in words ending with *ing*, particularly in progressives and gerund participles. Studies of these consonantal sounds suggest gendered patterns in their usage, although findings disagree on whether [-n] is more common among men or women in the South. One observation is conclusive, however: the lower the social class, the higher the rate of words ending with the alveolar /n/ (Hazen, 2022, pt. 4.2).

The Southern Vowel Shift

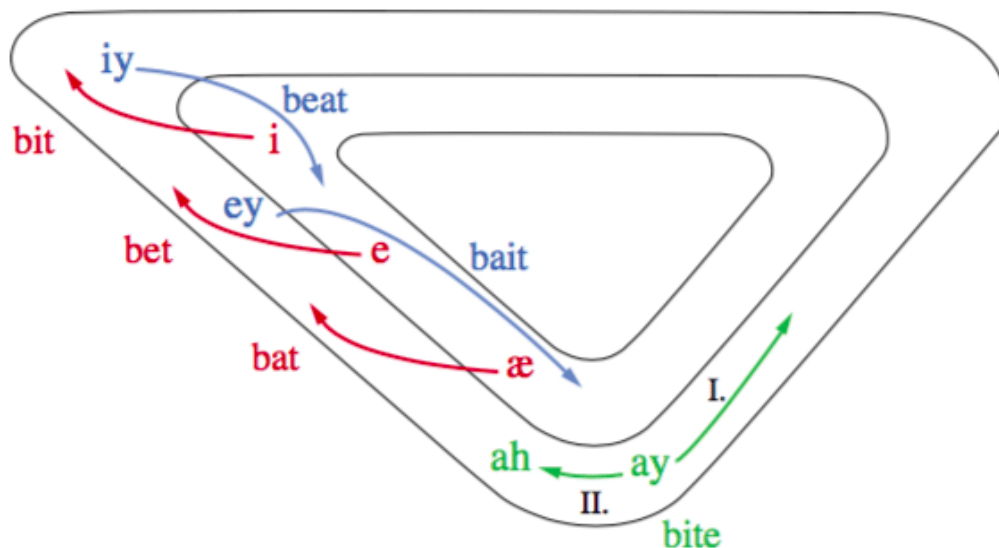
Even more distinctive than these consonantal sounds are the vowel variations that characterize Southern speech. The most documented and recognizable regional variant is the domino effect of the Southern Vowel Shift (SVS). Boberg’s *Accent in North American Film and Television* (2021) provides a concise explication of SVS that charts monophthongization or the shift that changes the pronunciation of a vowel from a diphthong to a monophthong (p. 12). As Boberg explains, this transposition involves the downward shift of long, front-up-gliding vowels from a combination of adjacent sounds to a single sound. One example compares the diphthongal /iy/ of fleece to the monophthongal /ey/ of face. The effect of SVS transforms the Southern pronunciation of “bay” into an approximation of “buy.” In contrast, the short, front vowels /i/, /e/, and /æ/ in words such as kit, dress, and trap glide upward to make a diphthongal sound so that bid

becomes “bee-id,” bed sounds like “bay-ed,” and bad slides into “buy-ad.”

Diphthongization also transforms the nuclei of the back-up-gliding vowels /uw/, /ow/, and /aw/ in words such as goose, goat, and mouth. In Southern dialect, these vowels shift forward, so that the vowel combination in a word like goose glides into both an /i/ and an /oo/ sound, becoming “gi-oose,” The word goat similarly lengthens into a diphthong that starts with /e/, such as in the word get, and glides into the /ow/. The result is a word that sounds like “ge-oat.” Finally, the word mouth begins with the /æ/ sound in mat and stretches into “ma-uth” (p. 12). A visual representation of the shift is found below:

Figure 3

The Southern Vowel Shift according to Labov (2005)



Note. From “The Southern Vowel Shift according to Labov (2005)” by T. Jones, 2020.

Although Boberg’s delineation might seem like a cohesive and commonly shared characteristic of Southern speech, the SVS can be divided into four stages based on its historical development. The first or earliest stage continues to have the widest regional

impact across socioeconomic categories (Hazen, 2022). In this stage, the glide in /ai/ shifts to /ah/, and this weakening of the vowel occurs mostly before voiced consonants like in “prize.” The second stage involves the upward glide in mid-frontal vowels that affect the pronunciation of words such as dress, while in the third stage, high-frontal vowels in words such as “kit” glide upward. Finally, the fronting of back vowels in words such as “goose” and “foot” characterize the fourth stage (Hazen, 2022, pt. 5.3). Few communities in the South display the features of all four stages, and significantly, features of SVS have migrated out of the region. A wide swath of the Mid-Atlantic and Midland regions lying outside the South evince, for example, a “monophthongization or glide deletion before nasals and liquids (in *fine, time, mile, tire etc.*)” This weakening of the diphthong occurs before voiceless obstruents (e.g. nice, tight); however, sociolinguists have observed this phonological pattern “only in core areas within the South, focused on eastern Tennessee and northern Texas, where it is related to social class” (Boberg, 2021, p.207).

Pen/Pin Merger

In addition to the Southern Vowel Shift, another recognizable linguistic marker of Southern dialects is the pin/pen merger. In this phonetic feature, the short vowels [ɪ] and [e] merge into the same vowel before nasal consonants [n] and [m]. Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent* (2012) includes a map of the pin/pen merger as a way of visualizing the region of the South:

Figure 4

Map of the Pen/Pin Merger



Note: From English with an accent: language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States by R. Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 216.

The vowel shifts and mergers that characterize Southern phonology are instrumental in effecting the region’s distinguishing “drawl.” Although the word “drawl” is widely recognized as a prosodic or rhythmic characteristic of Southern speech, it is only loosely defined from a linguistic standpoint. Explaining the cause of this malleability, Feagin (2007) relates the Southern drawl “to the pronunciation of vowels in stressed syllables, and its salient characteristics include the lengthening of vowels, the changing of simple vowels into diphthongs and triphthongs, and the producing of noticeable changes of pitch on the drawled word” (p. 192). In the drawl’s rhythmic intonations, any stressed syllable, whether short vowel, long vowel, or diphthong, can be lengthened and further diphthongized (Feagin, 2007; Boberg, 2021). The lengthening of

short vowels, often accompanied by diphthongization or even triphthongization, is an especially important feature of the drawl. Boberg illustrates this pattern by citing “the tensing of /i/, /e/, and /æ-æh/ . . . also frequently heard with /ʌ/ (strut) and /u/ (foot)” (Boberg, 2021, p. 211). Such sounds are more likely to be drawled when they occur at the end of a sentence or phrase (Feagin, 2007). Adding even more variability to the drawl’s production are changes in pitch that differ significantly across geography, demographics, socioeconomic condition, conversational topic, and self-identification.

Gender also impacts the sound, usage, and perceived effects of the Southern drawl. Feagin’s (2007) sociolinguistic study yields evidence that women and men drawl in different contexts, although he also suggests that the feminine drawl is perceptual. A feminine drawl is more often associated with feminine roles and ideals that subordinate women as hostesses or sexualize them as desirable objects (p. 193). This stereotyping of a feminine drawl as public performance contrasts with Feagin’s observations that men are more likely to drawl in private settings or when interacting “with their wives, children, close friends, horses and dogs in discussions of hunting, fishing, football” (2007, p. 193). This association between speech patterns and social relations reflects Feagin’s observation that the Southern drawl conveys an informality that serves to build community. Whether used by women while hosting to put their guests at ease, with a doctor to a child patient, or between men discussing recreational pastimes, the familiarity and ease inferred by the drawl is the same. Both men and women consequently avoid this familiar, rhythmic cadence of speech in formal or business situations and conversations addressing serious topics.

Representation of the South in Media

With the history and characteristic features of Southern speech in mind, the next step is to examine how the dialect is represented in popular media. As discussed in the section *Defining the South* on page 9, media has played a crucial role in shaping the national perception of the South since Reconstruction. With the advent of (talking) cinema and television, representations of Southern dialect could be spread to every corner of the US. But what “Southern accent” is being represented, and what does it say about the region? Southern speech is widely considered the most distinctive American accent, a perception that testifies to the influence of television and film in shaping viewers’ attitudes and opinions (Montgomery & Johnson, 2007, p. 1). As Brobst (2024) laments in “Why does every Southern accent in a movie sound so bad?” all Southern dialectal diversity is reduced on the big screen to two possibilities: “Southern and not” (para. 8).

If Brobst’s observation is accurate, what makes a person “sound Southern” to non-Southerners? The features explicated in the previous section, *Features of White Southern Speech*, highlight the three key characteristics of Southern English that non-Southerners recognize and are most likely to imitate (Lippi-Green, 2012). The first is the infamous pin/pen merger, more stigmatized than other phonetic mergers in the region because it *only* occurs in the South, according to Hazen (2022) and Lippi-Green (2012). The second is the monophthongization of /aɪ/ to /æ/. While this feature has been a well-known emblem of the “Southern accent” since the 20th century, Hazen (2022) indicates that the third stage of the SVS, in which the vowel in “kit” becomes raised, fronted, and diphthongized into /ki^ʔt/, is the most stigmatized vowel shift for many Southern

communities (pt. 5.3). Finally, every non-Southerner is familiar with “you all” or “y’all” as a substitute for the second-person plural pronoun (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 214). Though sometimes still mocked by non-Southerners, the famous second-person plural pronoun has migrated beyond the traditional boundaries of the South due to its utility in conversational speech (Hazen, 2022). Other features non-Southerners often mimic include dropping the “g” on –ing words to make an alveolar nasal [-ɪn], the perfective *done*, double modals (e.g. might could), *was* leveling, and other morphosyntactic modifications of *be*.

These linguistic features do much more than identify Southern speakers; they also signify knowledge about the region that supposedly shapes their identities. As noted by Southern historian Edward Ayers (1996), “the South often appears as the locus of the nonmodern...or of the modern world gone bad” in popular media (p. 70). This depiction of the South, he continued, carries “a lot of metaphorical baggage” (p. 70). Depending on the plot, Southerners can convey stories of poverty or rural isolation in a folksy, twangy vernacular, or the adoption of a non-rhotacized /r/—one rarely used in the contemporary South—can evoke nostalgia for the gentility of the Southern orators who ruled the South from their antebellum plantations. Each of these examples bears the weight of Southern history and its role in shaping the national narrative.

Legacy of Reconstruction

The cultural shaping of Southern identity in the national imagination begins with the era of Reconstruction that followed the Civil War. As Prince explains in *Stories of the South* (2014), “At all points, this reformation of southern identity was a national process. The character of the South was not, and could not be, an exclusively southern concern.

Northerners played a central role, as both actors and audience” (p. 3). Regardless of class status, geographic location, or partisan affiliation, inhabitants of the Northern states encountered information and images about their Southern neighbors. This engagement reflected that “[a]nyone who picked up a book, opened a periodical, or attended a public event had a very good chance of running into the Southern Question,” (p. 4). Conscious of this emerging Northern opinion, white Southerners set out to influence its development through the arts (Baker, 2007; Prince, 2014). Southern literature published in the 1880s and 1890s thus sought to entertain Northern readers with romantic portraits of dashing cavaliers and faithful slaves (Cox, 2011). Through these cultural productions, Southern authors such as Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris reclaimed “the exclusive right . . . to tell the South’s story to the nation” (Prince, 2014, p. 5). Minstrel shows brought these fantasies to life on the stage.

The South on Film

Narratives that began in literature, comic books, and minstrel shows expanded seamlessly to film in the early 1900s. The release of *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 made a nationwide impact on both the film industry and, more significantly, on Northern perceptions of Southern African Americans. The film depicted the South in an idealized, fictitious light, celebrating the KKK as valiant freedom fighters and, in stark contrast, casting African Americans as lazy and dangerous. Between the 1930s and 60s, films such as *Gone with the Wind* and series such as *The Andy Griffith Show* continued to paint a romanticized picture of the South. Lacking the explicit racism of early “Lost Cause” imagery, these productions framed the South as a relic of Southern charm and small-town values (Graham & Monteith, 2011). Both Northern and Southern filmmakers and

television producers continued to rely on the narrative power of core archetypes such as the Southern Belle, the Country Bumpkin, and the Good Ole Boy, further cementing these tropes in the American imagination (Cox, 2011; Shuttlesworth, 2007). Depictions of a preindustrial or rural South were especially compelling in the aftermath of World War II (Graham & Monteith, 2011, p. 4). Suburban domesticity merged with Cold War nationalism to rally patriotic sentiments around protecting the home and the values it embodied. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the Southern film genre captured these themes of Cold War propaganda, fulfilling white Americans' nostalgia for small-town relationships and communal values.

As the political climate changed, however, so did the cinematic representation of the South. As cited in Graham & Monteith's *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Vol. 18: Media* (2011), Edward Campbell Jr. documented, "the media myths that had been distilled in the Southern began to be condemned forcefully by large segments of the population" after 1965 (p. 4). The rise of Black Nationalism in the mid-1960s witnessed the production of issue-based films that called for a social response to the plight of Black communities in both the South and urbanized North and West. As cited in Graham & Monteith's (2011), philosopher Richard Rorty's 1989 claim best summarizes this era's impact on popular media: "the novel, the movie, and the TV program . . . replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicle of moral change and progress" (p. 7). As the American public grappled with more vocal demands to end racism and gender inequality, filmmakers explored the gothic underside of Southern history and culture that had lurked beneath the veneer of rural nostalgia.

These changes in politics and film brought subtle alterations to previously established stereotypes. Across films from the 1970s through the early 2000s, Southern iconography acquired “unsettling and even ominous connotations in films focused upon grave moral questions” that echoed the South’s dark and complex history (Graham & Monteith, 2011, p. 5). The South consequently became the setting for horror and true crime films, as Southern tropes were used to enhance shock value and “intensify [a film’s] moral texture” (p. 5). A trope is hardly a truth, however. This insight has led Graham and Monteith (2011) to argue, “When movies about the South are perceived—or *conceived*—as collective psychodramas, historical accuracy is usually sacrificed on the altar of suspended disbelief” (pp. 5-6). For example, the plot of *Mississippi Burning*, released in 1988, was fabricated and inaccurate, but the power of these distortions sparked an empathetic response among viewers and greater public interest in seeking justice for black homicides. Well into the twenty-first century, as interdisciplinary cultural scholars Gary McDonogh and Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong claim, the South remains “the locus of moral ambiguity for the cinema of a nation” (Graham & Monteith, 2011, p. 5).

Animated films and children’s programs also incorporate Southern characters and thus their dialectical idiosyncrasies. Lippi-Green’s *English with an Accent* (2012) includes a study that analyzed language-based tropes in Disney and Pixar films. It found that characters who fit Southern stereotypes such as comedic, uneducated hicks, or submissive, Southern belles have a semblance of “the Southern accent,” while other characters, especially protagonists and love interests, speak Standard American English (SAE). (Lippi-Green, 2012). These implicitly negative or subordinate portrayals illustrate

that, despite widespread public criticism, Walt Disney Studios continues to appeal to young audiences using prejudicial images and narratives.

The South on Television

In addition to film, images of the South are used and fabricated in a variety of popular mediums such as television sitcoms, network news programs, and comedy specials. These representations in popular culture continue to shape how a national audience perceives the South's supposed distinct regional identity. As previously referenced, *The Andy Griffith Show* illustrates that Southern settings and characters have entertained Americans since televisions first entered their homes. This beloved program ended in the late 1960s, however, just as cinematic nostalgia for a "lost" South was evolving into the horror of a found Southern past. Rather than bring the emerging genre of Southern Gothic to the small screen, one program found a middle ground in hillbilly culture. Based in Nashville, the Emmy-winning variety show *Hee Haw* ran from 1969 to 1992. Skits, vaudeville, witty banter, and country music combined with rustic small-town sets, barnyard animals, and costumes of gingham frocks and denim overalls to satisfy locals' nostalgia for the South they remembered, while also serving up a plate of comedic, reductionist stereotypes for a new national palate (Graham & Monteith, 2011, p. 269-270). In her article on *Hee Haw* in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Vol. 18: Media* (2011), Sally Walburn writes, "*Hee Haw* amplified traditional southern stereotypes; [as] backwoods moonshiners, crooked small-town judges, illiterate bumpkins, egotistical belles, and buxom beauties offered a generation of viewers a primer on established character types associated with the region" (p. 270). She concluded that this reliance on heavy stereotyping provided comedic material that appealed to both

Northern and Southern audiences by “project[ing] an innocent, lighthearted, peace-loving image of white southerners, an image much different from the violent racists captured on network news programs of the period” (p. 270).

During *Hee Haw*'s long run on American television, racial violence was very much in the news. Beginning in the 1950s, coverage of lynchings and other attacks against African Americans was caught on film and broadcast around the world. These images helped generate democratic support for the legislative objectives of the Civil Rights Movement. Occurring in 1955, the murder of Emmett Till was the first event to force greater awareness of the violence that lurked beneath Southern mythology (Watts, 2010). Mississippi suddenly became a dangerous and backward swampland in the public consciousness, a perception that shaped both the production and reception of *Mississippi Burning* over thirty years later. Cultivated in these early news reports, the association of the South with white supremacist violence impacted those who broadcast these events by fostering a national bias that favored Midwestern and upper-class Northern accents. This preference actually predated the Civil Rights Movement. Despite a successful career in journalism, David Brinkley of the popular *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* felt compelled to hire a speech specialist to mitigate the threat that his Southern accent posed to his radio career in the 1930s (Graham & Monteith, 2011, p. 31). Brinkley's elocution lessons set an example that Southern newscasters have followed ever since.

The “choice” of newscasters to alter their Southern accents demonstrates that the power of broadcast media to shape national assumptions of “normal” or “accepted” speech should not be understated. Like music and other commodities, national broadcasting has marketed a standardized dialect language to a general audience of

consumers, and for this practical reason, dialectical standardization is “implicitly and explicitly supported by the information industry” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 230). This “Network Standard” accent generally resembles a typical Midwestern newscaster, leaving those with a “non-standard” accent disadvantaged in the field (Preston, 2007, p. 164, p. 167; Lippi-Green, 2012). Adopting this Network Standard has become a requirement for news professionals. While it remains a “hurdle for many natives of Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Minnesota, no Americans suffer more from their nonadherence to this standard than southerners,” as Graham and Monteith have observed (2011, p. 32). Ironically, even local news stations in the South continue to require broadcasters to cultivate “nonaccent,” which has spawned a small industry of accent reduction courses in Southern states (Graham & Monteith, 2011, p. 32; Lippi-Green, 2012). The justification for this linguistic makeover is the claim that a pronounced Southern accent distracts viewers from the broadcast’s content. It also alludes, however, to what Lippi-Green (2012) refers to as unacceptable origins in newscasting. Demonstrating the impact of popular culture, a white Southern accent continues to open, as Lippi-Green explains, a Pandora’s box of stereotypes that causes the broadcaster to appear uneducated, racist, or unpolished to viewers who have absorbed the cultural stereotypes associated with a Southern dialect. Lurene Cachola Kelley has corroborated this assessment in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Vol. 18: Media* (2011) when she stated:

As is the case with both southern and northern African Americans who use nonstandard English, as well as foreigners who learn English but retain their native accents, many white southerners, particularly those who want to be

professionally successful outside the South, are often advised to assimilate

“orally” into the mainstream—in other words, lose their accents or fail. (p. 33)

The increasing diversity of broadcasters in recent years seems to belie this conclusion; however, the willingness of Northern audiences to view Southern professionals as experts in their fields remains an untested question (Graham & Monteith, 2011, pp. 31, 33-34).

The South in Stand-up Comedy

In contrast to news broadcasters, comedians often capitalize on regionalisms for their stand-up content. The Southern Emmy-winning radio show *Hee Haw* facilitated the rise of comedians such as Atlanta-born Jeff Foxworthy, the Texans Bill Engvall and Ron White, and Larry the Cable Guy. Their comedic styles successfully relied on Southern stereotypes and tropes, as illustrated by Foxworthy’s “You might be a redneck” sketches. Daniel Lawrence Whitney, better known by his stage name Larry the Cable Guy, was born and raised in Nebraska but gained recognition only after he invented a “hillbilly” Southern persona constructed from stereotypes. Performing in regional drag, these entertainers became the face of Southern comedy for a generation (Wicks, 2015). In recent years, Southern comedians have expanded their repertoire beyond the stereotypical equation of a crass regional and class identity. Native Nashvillian Nate Bargatze has gained national fame, for example, by drawing on genuine Southern roots to tell personal stories that evoke laughter without relying on stereotypes. Given the success of these performers, even non-Southern comedians want in on the joke. These entertainers might mimic a Southern accent when delivering a politically pointed punchline or simply ridiculing ignorance or a perceived lack of intelligence. Other comedians have taken a

less pejorative approach by making light-hearted observations about the region when their tours take them to Southern cities.

An example is Anjelah Johnson-Reyes, who created one sketch based on the culture shock she experienced as a Californian outsider visiting an insular region in the South (800 Pound Gorilla Media, 2024). In one joke, she compares the simple exchange with strangers such as she might have in Los Angeles to a conversation she overhears between two women in a store in Nashville. She is accustomed to a quick “Can I help you find anything?” answered with “I’m ok, thanks.” In contrast, imitating a thick Southern drawl, she relates the lengthy back-and-forth of hyper-friendly Southern greetings, including a discussion about the weather and the traffic, ending with an exaggerated “bless your heart!” After extended cheers and applause from the audience, Johnson-Reyes exclaims, “I was like, oh I don’t know if I have energy for the South!” (800 Pound Gorilla Media, 2024, 0:01:30-0:01:47). The crowd, clearly from the South, loved the appreciation of their accent and culture.

Sweet Home Alabama: A Case Study of Reclaiming Cultural Identity

Introduction

A more critical perspective wonders if love will be enough to compensate for the possibilities that are lost. In 2002, an iconic film was added to the canon of romantic comedies that capitalize on existing regional stereotypes. Portraying the genre’s well-established formula, *Sweet Home Alabama* follows the journey of a successful fashion designer who rediscovers her love for a hometown boyfriend and his small-town, Southern life. The film begins with Melanie Carmichael (having changed her surname from Smooter) eyeing the pinnacle of personal and professional success. A youthful

indiscretion, however, threatens to undermine the life she has created for herself in New York City. When Melanie's wealthy and socially prominent boyfriend proposes to her, she must return to her hometown (Pigeon Creek) in Alabama and convince the high school boyfriend she had hastily married, then abandoned, to sign official divorce papers. The movie's plot traces Melanie's descent into the South and the unrefined life she had left behind. Initially, Melanie can barely contain her disgust with her former home and "hick" husband. Over the course of the movie, she rekindles relationships with her parents and the members of her former community. She also reconnects with her "Southern-ness," and, fulfilling the expectation of a happy ending, Melanie rekindles her love for Jake and decides to stay with him in Alabama.

Romantic comedies are often dismissed as influential cultural texts because they are associated with predominantly female audiences. As film scholars have demonstrated, however, the genre has a constructive power due to the pleasure it evokes and its perceived lack of social commentary or political purpose. *Sweet Home Alabama* illustrates this argument by appearing to be simply a lighthearted movie about the triumph of love over ambition. Nevertheless, the effect is far from simple. Set in an imagined South, Melanie's conflict over competing values, identities, and possibilities for her future relies on and performatively reproduces a regionally determined historical, cultural, and political binary.

The film creates this opposition through dialect. A historically informed, sociolinguistic analysis of *Sweet Home Alabama* reveals a significant message about the South and its dialect that runs parallel to and in support of the central romantic plot. At its core, the film is about a Southern woman reclaiming her cultural identity, primarily

manifested in reverting to her native non-standard dialect. Reflecting a major thread of this thesis, the backdrop of *Sweet Home Alabama* relies on the presumed opposition between the North and South. This imagined binary frames Melanie's choices, providing a stage for her to leave a city (NYC) defined by ambition and materialism and embark on a journey of cultural recovery and personal redemption that restores her sense of belonging to her community of origin. Melanie is played by Reese Witherspoon, who was born in Louisiana to parents hailing from Georgia and Tennessee and is thus a genuine Southerner. In the film, Witherspoon enacts a dramatic shift from a more "neutral" Northern accent to a strong Southern to mark the rediscovery of a cultural identity accompanied by her romantic choice. The total effect of Melanie's overt and covert linguistic transition is an intriguing message about the relationship between region, identity, and dialect.

Southern Stereotypes on the Big Screen

Sweet Home Alabama is hardly a nuanced representation of the South, nor does it try to be. This genre rom-com instead exploits existing stereotypes to create a flattened and easily distinguishable representation of Southern culture for a national audience. The film's heavy-handed reliance on regional stereotypes suggests a presumption that viewers will have a pejorative opinion about the South that will evolve alongside Melanie's reawakening appreciation for her community and its idiosyncrasies. This evolution requires evoking and reinforcing an imagined and comparatively archaic Southern "otherness" from the rest of the nation while presenting the South in a more positive light. Familiar tropes paint Pigeon Creek, Alabama, as the well-worn stereotype of Southern small-town life: quaint, simple, anti-modern, and stuck in the past, isolated from the rest of the nation. The staging conveys that Pigeon Creek is full of young mothers in

cheap clothing, raucous hicks, and matrons wielding the weapon of passive-aggressive politeness. Depicting these stereotypes allows the film's writers to forego a more nuanced development of characters through narrative. Instead, the film relies on viewers' assumptions about external signifiers such as language, aesthetic choices, and leisure activities to ascribe internal attributes like personality, ideology, and values to its Southern characters.

This storytelling shortcut threatens the believability of the film's resolution, for it reinforces stereotypically Southern beliefs and behaviors that both Melanie and a post-civil rights audience have learned to reject. For example, the film avoids confronting the South's complex and morally ambiguous racial history by pushing black characters to the movie's periphery in racially coded roles. Pigeon Creek's black residents support the town's white inhabitants as bank tellers, police officers, and servants. This positioning is reinforced by scenes that blatantly display Confederate couch pillows and overtly praise the Confederacy. These artifacts of a white supremacist history are framed, however, as a benign piece of Southern heritage, signifying the movie's reiteration of Lost Cause mythology and its reliance on the persistent market for Southern nostalgia. Avoiding this racial elephant in the room enables Pigeon Creek to function as the quaint, lighthearted backdrop of a romantic comedy that depicts Melanie's choice and, thus, Pigeon Creek as superior to the urban environment and superficial relationships she rejects. However, only by erasing the South's historical complexity can the culture, identity, and region enacted by Melanie Smooter and her family function to critique the northern "villains" of the movie. A watered-down, whitewashed rendering of the South is thus deemed

necessary to understand how Melanie could both reject her hometown and then choose to reclaim it.

Opposition through Dialect

In *Sweet Home Alabama*, dialect is a powerful tool utilized to construct the binary opposition between North and South. In both film and society, accent triggers a myriad of presuppositions regarding a person's lifestyle, values, and beliefs for an interlocutor or, in the case of film, the viewer (Lippi-Green, 2012). When people speak with a Southern accent, their interlocutor(s) and audience likely assume that they are, "until proven otherwise, traditional, backward, obsessed with the past, friendly, potentially violent, racist, and polite" (Ayers, 1996, p. 66). Films like *Sweet Home Alabama* capitalize on such assumptions by using exaggerated accents to juxtapose Northern and Southern characters. These exaggerations compromise authentic, dialectical representation in favor of narrative beats or comedic moments. The presumption of this relationship between dialect and character serves *Sweet Home Alabama's* narrative arc at the expense of its representational accuracy. Although numerous artifacts and tropes signify Pigeon Creek's difference from the gloss of New York City, none is as telling or significant as dialect. The pronounced accents of Melanie's friends and relatives characterize them as recognizably Southern, and the regional stereotypes associated with the Southern characters' distinctive idioms and intonations support the progression and plausibility of an otherwise banal plot.

The film also relies heavily on dialectical code-switching to signify the regional differences and conflicts that shape Melanie's choice between Northern upward mobility and Southern authenticity. As defined by Meyerhoff (2011), code-switching is "the alternation between varieties, or codes, across sentences or clause boundaries" (p.121).

Illustrating this phenomenon, Melanie speaks throughout the film with a Northern accent when she is *narratively opposed* to the Southerners around her. Whether angry with Jake for refusing to cooperate or frustrated with her parents' judgment of her life in New York, she consciously maintains "standard" speech. In contrast, Melanie adopts a Southern accent, consciously or unconsciously, when she *reconnects* with people from her past or with her regional identity like running into old friends or sharing a nostalgic moment with Jake. Through such moments of code-switching, the film relies on and reinforces the perception that dialect manifests fundamental cultural, emotional, and ideological oppositions between those who speak "standard" English and those who demonstrate its Southern variants.

One sociolinguistic theory helps explain both the strategic and reflexive uses of dialect Melanie evinces. Introduced by Howard Giles in 1973 and expounded on by many sociolinguists in the subsequent decades, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is "the process by which speakers *attune* or adapt their linguistic behaviour in light of their interlocutors' behaviour and their attitudes towards their interlocutors" (Meyerhoff, 2011, p. 75). According to this definition by Meyerhoff (2011), a speaker may be "triggered by conscious or unconscious desires" to reflect or diverge from their interlocutor's speech norms to highlight similarities or differences (pp. 75-76). When interpreted relative to the framework of CAT, Melanie attunes to her parents' and Jake's speech patterns, either consciously or unconsciously, by using divergence to emphasize the cultural differences that distinguish them. Conversely, Melanie attunes her dialect to match her friends Wayde and Bobby Ray, relying on convergence to signify their shared belonging to the same ingroup.

Not only does Melanie shift accents, but she also attunes to Southern conventions of conversation. Her body language becomes more relaxed, she becomes more playful and physically demonstrative when conversing, and she engages in flirtatious banter as a mode of greeting. This change in posture is particularly noticeable when Melanie first re-encounters Bobby Ray while walking through Pigeon Creek. Talking on the phone and dressed in peak New York fashion, Melanie sticks out like a sore thumb in the dusty town. When Bobby Ray catcalls her, Melanie starts to insult him but stops when she realizes the perpetrator's identity. Melanie immediately transforms into her Southern persona, smiling and exclaiming greetings in a Southern dialect. The ease with which Melanie slips into her familiar accent is strikingly different from her linguistic behavior when she reunites with Jake and other old friends. Fueled by a desire to prove to Jake the superiority of the person she has become, she maintains her New York persona, engaging in attunement divergence and, consequently, representing herself in opposition to him through the seemingly strategic use of dialect and behavior.

Melanie's linguistic behavior appears strategic because her proficiency in dialectal code-switching is already well-established before she confronts Jake about a divorce. From the opening sequence in New York, Melanie's Southern origin sets her apart from her Northern colleagues. When she awakes from a dream about her childhood, for example, and a friend remarks, "That accent of yours is a whole lot thicker when you sleep" (Tennant, 2002, 00:02:04). This observation leads to embarrassment, a response that conveys Melanie's desire to distance herself from the past and its characteristic dialect. Attempting to mitigate the stigma of her regional difference, Melanie traces her lineage to the antebellum South and even gentrifies her name by replacing "Smooter"

with the more prestigious sounding “Carmichael.” Conscious of the stereotypes attached to the intersection of class and regional identity, Melanie disavows her family’s humble origins and evokes a historicized fantasy of a wealthy Southern Belle that Northerners might admire or at least find charming and quaint. Presenting herself as a relic of the nation’s romanticized past not only confers a recognizable status and reputation, but this misrepresentation also qualifies Melanie to compete for upward mobility in an urban environment structured by capitalism’s individualistic goals and transactional relationships.

Questions of authenticity and belonging consequently plague Melanie throughout the film and shape the plot’s resolution. Adopting a new name reflects Melanie’s attempt to acknowledge her regional difference, while also passing as socioeconomically identical to her upper-class colleagues and fiancé. Melanie nevertheless fails to escape the condescension of her New York friends and Andrew’s mother Kate; for despite her beauty, style, and ambition, Melanie’s detectable accent remains a testament to her difference. Even when affecting her most “neutral” accent, Melanie is audibly Southern to the non-Southerners, creating a sociocultural barrier and an implied economic gap between them.

While Melanie may be too Southern to blend into New York City, she has changed her accent enough to compromise her belonging in the South. Upon returning to Pigeon Creek, Melanie’s family and friends react as if her Southern accent has entirely vanished. Her mother exclaims, for example, “Listen to that accent!” (Tennant, 2002, 00:26:38). When she subsequently plays a prank on Jake, he remarks that she has gotten her accent *back*, implying that he had interpreted her accent until that moment as

Northern and inauthentic (00:34:27). Until this point in the film, only the opening dream sequence of Melanie's childhood had provided evidence of her original Southern accent. The dramatic change in Melanie's accent can be inferred only through the commentary of friends and family and the contrast between their thick drawls and Melanie's affected tone. This contrast indicates that Melanie is attuning divergently with her parents to demonstrate how much she has grown past her past both culturally and economically. Her affected dialect, which is neither authentically Northern nor stereotypically Southern, serves to construct a regional and class barrier between herself and her parents. It also signifies Melanie's belief that she has hurdled this regional divide by breaking free from the backward culture to which her parents are tied and moving into the more urbane and modern society she imagines the North to be.

Melanie's return to the South exposes the error of the belief that she can escape what she has repressed. The turning point in Melanie's identity crisis occurs when one too many drinks at a local bar reveals an unwanted truth. Despite the clothes, mannerisms, and attitudes that she has adopted to distance herself from all that she longed to transcend, Melanie's accent remains purely and authentically Southern and waiting to break free at any unguarded moment. Intoxicated with the mixture of alcohol and old friendships, the dissonance between Melanie's appearance and her accent signals the onset of the internal, rather than regional, conflict that Melanie must resolve for the film to reach its desired conclusion. Melanie enters the bar convinced that she is now "better than" her old friends because she has gone North and, by acquiring professional success, an advantageous relationship, and a sophisticated urban lifestyle, is "doing something with my life" (Tennant, 2002, 00:45:52; 00:46:13). A few too many drinks

lead Melanie to reveal, however, that her unkind attitude is only a cover for the insecurity she continues to feel. Melanie realizes that the old friends surrounding her share neither her shame nor her anxieties. Instead, they enjoy where and how they live, secure in the knowledge of their belonging. Melanie's expressed regret after the revelations of the bar scene marks the beginning of her journey to reevaluating the community she had previously held in contempt.

Melanie's perceived crisis in choosing between the regional identity she has repressed and the one she has performatively adopted is inseparable from her evolving relationship with Jake. Just as dialect is the medium through which Melanie enacts her identity crisis, it also plays an essential role in navigating her conflicts with the Southern husband she wants to divorce. The film introduces Jake by using his clothing, lifestyle, mannerisms, and especially dialect to portray him as a stereotypical "uneducated hick." His subsequent scene subverts this depiction, however, by demonstrating that Jake is neither ignorant nor unaware of the stereotypes he embodies. When Melanie expresses shock that Jake has followed her adventures in New York City from afar and knows she has a boyfriend, he replies, "Honey, just because I talk slow doesn't mean I'm stupid" (Tennant, 2002, 00:36:08). Moments later, he exploits the same stereotype to frustrate her by delaying his agreement to sign the divorce papers. "Hell, I'm just a simple country boy. There's words in there I can't even pronounce. You might be taking me to the cleaners, for all I know" (00:37:07).

Melanie similarly manipulates dialect to battle with Jake. When her mean-spirited prank provokes an argument, Melanie and Jake deploy Southern dialect stereotypes as weapons in their conflict. The prank begins when Melanie adopts a thick Southern accent

and performs the “duties” of a stereotypical Southern wife. By cleaning, cooking, and decorating, she transforms Jake’s cluttered, dirty house into a warm home straight out of a *Southern Living* magazine—using *his* hard-earned money. Performing not only an exaggerated accent but also mannerisms and culture, Melanie smiles widely and asks, “How’s the family?” (Tennant, 2002, 00:34:00). Jake furiously demands to know where she has put his things, and Melanie responds, “Now, what kind of wife would I be if I didn’t pick up after my husband?” (00:34:09). In this scene, Melanie self-consciously puts on a sociolinguistic stereotype of a traditional, Southern housewife to spite Jake. Her intent is hostile, however, as the exaggerated convergence distances her from the cultural role and marital relationship. Responding with equal animosity, Jake quips, “Nice to see you got your accent back” (00:34:27). Melanie consequently drops the Southern accent when the argument over the divorce papers resumes (00:34:18). However, moments later she unconsciously slips back into her Southern dialect when she and Jake nostalgically reminisce about fond childhood memories.

Enacted through her shifting dialect, Melanie’s internal conflict reaches its climax in the wedding scene. The cinematography highlights the choice Melanie must make about her identity through the visual opposition between the sophisticated and powerful mother of Melanie’s Northern fiancé and Melanie’s own mother. Positioned on opposing sides of the screen, the dueling mothers are arranged visually like a couple at the altar, with the priest in the center of the frame behind them. The possibility of regional reconciliation, symbolized by the marriage of a Northern son and a Southern daughter, devolves into a confrontational standoff in which one regional progenitrix must triumph over the other. Melanie ultimately determines the outcome of this contest, however, when

her fiancé's Northern mother condescendingly tells Pearl Smooter, "Oh, go back to your double-wide and fry something" (Tennant, 2002, 01:37:44). Unable to tolerate the ridicule expressed through this stereotype, Melanie cries in her thickest Southern accent, "Nobody talks to my mama like that!" (01:37:58). Melanie punctuates this exclamation by punching Kate Hennings, who is the mayor of New York City. The camera changes angles to reinforce the altered balance of power as it depicts Mayor Hennings lying on the ground and Melanie's family and friends leaning over her as the victors. Declaring both victory for the Southern cause and the successful resolution of Melanie's internal battle, Melanie's father exclaims, "Praise the Lord, the South has risen again!" (01:38:01).

As this penultimate scene suggests, Melanie's happy ending fails to offer an alternative to the perceived binary between North and South, a possible integration of these regions' defining values and attributes, or a reconciliation of each region's stereotypical inhabitants. Rather than foster a sense of mutual understanding or shared identity, the plot achieves its resolution only when Melanie "chooses sides" between opposing cultures. The reinforcement of this regionalized dichotomy raises important questions about the functions and effects of Southern "othering," but *Sweet Home Alabama* suggests only discouraging answers if the hope is to overcome regional polarization. Melanie ultimately makes the recognizably better choice, but her decision to restore an essential connection to family, friends, and her own authenticity is possible only in contrast to the North's representation as a superficial, urbanized, capitalist culture. The South's ability to perform this critique depends on a romanticized, whitewashed portrayal that obfuscates the region's history and its persistent racial and

socioeconomic inequalities. While the film attests to their existence, it relies on historical myths to downplay their significance. The romantic fantasy of belonging that redeems Melanie and celebrates her Southern home ultimately reinforces the South's difference and, consequently, its potential marginalization.

Staged in a nostalgic rendering of the South that is drawn in contrast to the North, *Sweet Home Alabama* ends with the return of Melanie's repressed Southern accent. It is this convergence of dialect, more so than Melanie's recognition of her enduring love for Jake, that signifies her choice to continue growing from her Southern roots. Unclear is whether the revival of Melanie's Southern dialect will also require her to give up the polished social behaviors and upwardly mobile professional ambitions that characterized the aesthetic preferences that drew her to a Northern city. In the world of *Sweet Home Alabama*, however, any integration of the rigidly distinct monoliths of North and South seems impossible, as does Melanie's ability to signify any identification with elements selectively drawn from each region's distinctive and opposing cultures. Thus, the regional binary that stages Melanie's choice paradoxically makes it impossible for her choices to overcome this dichotomy. The film's conclusion suggests that Melanie's identity is overly and immutably determined by her Southern birth, and this conflation of place and person ultimately leaves Melanie with no choice but to recover a Southern dialect that enables her to "side" with her family and make her home in Alabama.

Conclusion

Today, the South weighs heavily with historical and moral complexity accumulated since the nation's conception. It defies description as a discrete region, a fixed culture, a homogenous people, or a common dialect. Since no definition of the

South is neutral, analyzing the region through an interdisciplinary lens, one that focuses on the *perception* of the South over time, generates valuable insights into its identity and place in the larger narrative of the United States today. These reveal that the history of Southern representation has been a battle for control over the region's image, as Southerners and non-Southerners have vied for the power to dictate the region's cultural mythos and shape its turbulent legacy into a self-flattering narrative. The results of this battle are visible in the countless examples that show how media production and consumption have informed how non-Southerners perceive the South as both a place and a culture. Whether romanticized for its small-town simplicity, family values, and charm, pathologized for its racist past and present, or ridiculed for its uneducated, inbred, and backward inhabitants, any such representations of the South, positive or negative, are ultimately reductive. Though they may contain traces of truth, these simplified assertions confine the South to a flat, one-sided sketch, unchanged since it was first conceived. Contextualizing this reality exposes the South's role in the national public image. The (white) South *must* remain stagnant and definable to maintain its function as the national scapegoat, the locus of racism, perversity, and dangerous ignorance to which the larger United States can point to as the source of its moral failings as a country. With the South taking the brunt of the blame, the nation can proclaim itself a moral and cultural leader on the international stage.

Dialect is both the channel through which non-Southerners hold the South at arm's length *and* the performative tool Southerners use to resist this alienation and assert regional pride. Today, faced with the charged historical and sociopolitical implications of their speech taken for granted by their peers, Southerners like my friends and I realize we

must carefully choose a “side” online and in the workplace by embracing or erasing our dialect. More than anything, this project has illuminated for me the power of sociolinguistic and historical constructs in shaping individual identity. Language is a feature of human biology no less natural or essential than our heart or lungs. Within society, however, language variation becomes an angle of abjection, discrimination, and control. Likewise, it becomes an opportunity to assert ingroup belonging and positive self-expression.

Sweet Home Alabama provides a contemporary glimpse into this unspoken but consequential sociolinguistic reality. Melanie’s journey of reclaiming her Southern identity through her accent attempts to challenge the stigma surrounding the South. In the end, however, the whitewashed, romanticized portrayal of Pigeon Creek threatens to undermine the authenticity of Melanie’s choice to return to her Southern home. The conclusion of this rom-com begs the question: Can white Southerners only embrace their dialect and culture if they *ignore* the controversial or uncomfortable truths of the past? Are the South and its inhabitants allowed to evolve beyond a static remnant of history in the public eye, to be seen for more than its romanticized or pathologized stereotypes? Historian Edward Ayers (1996) eloquently found in the past an insight that remains descriptive of the South’s present and future. He wrote, “The very story of the South is . . . not a fixed, known, and unified place but a place of constant movement, struggle, and negotiation” (p. 81). One need only observe the dialectical performances of Southern identity enacted through media such as *Sweet Home Alabama* to follow the South’s ongoing evolution in the national imagination.

Directions for Further Research

As the internet generates new forms of media, the pace of these evolving depictions promises to escalate. Starting in the early 2010s, the shift from movie theaters and prime-time television to streaming platforms has made tracking a particular thread in popular culture more difficult. More and more Americans receive their news through social media such as Facebook or Instagram rather than through television or print journalism. Responding to these shifting consumption habits, musicians, comedians, and other entertainers and personalities have sought recognition through self-promotional clips on a variety of social media platforms. In this rapidly changing digital age, the impact of social media on dialect exposure, representation, stigmatization, and perception is yet to be fully explored. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, present a vast array of unique and potentially rich opportunities to explore and discuss evolving representations, perceptions, and performances of Southern identity and culture. Content creation on these platforms differs from television and film in that the production is often not backed by a studio or large corporation. Rather, individual creators react to other individuals, following trends to attract views and followers. Algorithms monitor the success of their efforts, as each viewed or liked post pushes a consumer's content suggestions into an increasingly narrow bubble of topics and interests. The effect is to isolate social media consumers from opposing opinions and new interests. A wave of scholarship will inevitably develop in the next few decades as scholars try to understand the impact of digital media on the perception, performance, and transmission of Southern dialects on the national and international stage.

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