

AMERICAN TONGUES

An Instructional Guide

FOR PREVIEW ONLY
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About ‘American Tongues’

“American Tongues” portrays some of the interesting regional, social, and ethnic differences in American speech, and the attitudes that people have about these differences. Because it builds upon the natural curiosity Americans have about dialects, audiences will find it quite entertaining. At times, however, it is also blunt and straightforward as it depicts the kinds of attitudes Americans have about their speech. The presentation is intended to educate viewers about the nature of dialects, but it also challenges them to confront their own attitudes about language variation. Some of the educational content is obvious, as basic facts about language differences are presented directly; however, other important insights can be gleaned from the real life scenarios that are presented. A post-viewing discussion based upon some of the scenarios can enhance the educational value of the documentary considerably. Following are some guidelines that might be used in structuring the discussion of the video with an audience of viewers. Obviously, adaptations will have to be made for different audiences, but productive discussions can be held with groups ranging from elementary school children to graduate students and other adults. Furthermore, it is appropriate for civic groups, community gatherings, and other public audiences regardless of educational and class background.

Introducing the Video

Little introduction is needed in presenting the video. For the most part, it is self-explanatory, so that viewers need simply to be told that dialects are an important part of American society, and that this documentary shows how dialects function in the United States. Viewing audiences may, however, be told to observe how English varies, the kinds of attitudes Americans have about dialects, and the controversies that surround their use. If the video is shown in the context of a particular subject area (e.g. English studies, history, sociology, psychology, etc.), viewers might be alerted to observe some of the particular emphases of the discipline, but no elaborate previewing explanation is called for.

The terms *accent* and *dialect* are used interchangeably in the video to refer to language variation associated with regional and social differences among speakers of a language. These differences can occur not only in pronunciation, but also in grammar, vocabulary, and conversational style.

Post-Viewing Discussion

There are three major areas in the presentation that are ideal for discussion: 1) the nature of dialect differences, 2) basic attitudes about dialects in American society, and 3) the uses of standard and vernacular dialects. There is ample illustration of each of these issues to serve as the basis for a detailed and lively post-viewing discussion. The discussion questions in this booklet refer to sequences in the 56-minute Standard Version of “American Tongues.” If the 40-minute High School Version is being shown, certain questions will not be relevant. These questions are marked with a dagger (†) and can be omitted in discussion.

1. The Nature of Dialect Differences

Dialects are a natural, inevitable part of cultural and regional differences in American society. Furthermore, all communities have dialect differences of one type or another. Viewers should reinforce these facts by citing different scenarios from the video and by citing dialect differences around them.

QUESTIONS:

What kinds of dialect differences do you notice in this area?

When you travel someplace outside of the region is there anything in particular people notice about your speech?

A man from Ohio says that in his area they speak “just plain American, no dialect, no accent...straight out of the dictionary.” Does this man speak a dialect? Do you speak a dialect?

Questions about dialects from viewers should elicit anecdotes about dialect peculiarities in the local community or in other communities where people have travelled. For the most part, the anecdotes may be expected to focus on vocabulary differences and pronunciation differences. As the discussion develops, it is important to emphasize to viewers that each and every one of them speaks a dialect.

A. Manifestations of Dialect Variation

There are a number of different levels of language on which dialect variation can be revealed. Most of these are amply illustrated in the video. These include pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and language functions (i.e. how language is used to carry out various communicative and social functions). By referring to different scenarios in the video, you can lead viewers to recognize these levels of dialect differences.

[1] Pronunciation (The Pronunciation of Words)

The opening scene, where different people from different areas recite “Mary had a little lamb” demonstrates dialect variation in pronunciation.

QUESTION:

What are some of the differences in how people from different regions recite “Mary had a little lamb”?

[2] Vocabulary (The labels for different items and activities)

The use of words such as cabinet ‘milkshake’, schlep ‘carry’, gumband ‘rubber band’, antigoggin ‘crooked’, snickelfritz ‘rowdy child’, and so forth illustrate the vocabulary level of language differences.

QUESTIONS:

Are there words in the video that you did not know before viewing it? Which ones?

What are some of the different words around here that people from another area might not know?

[3] Grammar (*The way words are composed and put into sentences*)

The use of double negatives (e.g. I ain't got no...), a grammatical difference, is amply illustrated by speakers in the video (e.g. the scene in which Southern woman discussing "white trash" speech recalls how negatives are used, the Black teenaged girls conversing about a "school girl", Phillip, the Boston North End teenager talking about how he uses the dialect to his benefit, etc.)

QUESTION:

How do people from different social groups use grammar in different ways?

[4] Language Functions (*The way language forms are used to carry out the social functions of communication*)

Different styles of greeting, carrying on a conversation, and interacting with language illustrate language function differences. Appalachians are described as talking around a subject for a long time before getting to the topic. The man selling incense on the street interacts with his customer in a way different from an over-the-counter sale. The conversation between people in a pickup truck (described by the Texas historian) shows a conversational setting which is different from those used in other communities. Language function differences illustrate how language can be used in varying roles across communities. This level of difference is a critical aspect of dialect differences that is sometimes overlooked in the consideration of dialect differences.

QUESTIONS:

Can you think of different kinds of greeting styles that different groups have?

What are some ways that people use language differently as they relate to each other?

B. Reasons for Dialect Differences

Dialect differences come from a number of different sources, including historical settlement patterns, migratory routes, contact with other language groups, and physical and social separation.

[1] Settlement Patterns

(†) One of the Boston men discussing the relative literary merits of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen says that “we came over here with the first load of bricks,” and that “I have been here for 350 years.” This refers to the historical affinity that New England has with early groups of settlers in America. In a similar way, the Tangier Island speech can be traced back to its settlement hundreds of years ago, demonstrating the influence of settlement patterns in the development of a dialect.

QUESTIONS:

(†) What does the Boston Brahmin gentleman mean when he says “I’ve been here 350 years ... We came over with the first load of bricks”? How might this be reflected in the language of some parts of New England?

Do you know where the original settlers from your area came from? Are there any features of the local dialects you think can be traced to these early settlers?

[2] Migration

The map of the United States shows how the English-speaking population migrated westward from its original settlement areas along the East Coast. Notice how dialect patterns tend to follow broadly-based migratory routes.

QUESTIONS:

As the United States was settled, what were some of the major trends in the movement of people? Do you see a relation between the major routes of movement and some of the dialects of English?

What major routes of migration affected this area? Can you see these major routes in the local dialect?

[3] Contact with Other Languages

Notice how words like pau bang ('work is finished') from Hawaiian, snickelfritz ('rowdy child' from German), and jambalaya ('spicy rice dish' from French) are used in areas where there is fairly close contact with other languages.

QUESTIONS:

Can you think of other words from other languages that are used in certain regions? Why are certain foreign words used in some regions and not in others?

[4] Physical and Social Isolation

Islands and mountains are natural environments for the development and perpetuation of dialect differences. In a similar way, ethnic and class separation may lead to the development and maintenance of dialect differences. (†) At one extreme, the speech of the fishermen of Tangier Island (off the coast of Virginia) is so distinct as to be almost unintelligible to some speakers from other parts of the country.

QUESTIONS:

What physical conditions about Appalachia or Tangier Island might cause these dialects to become quite distinct? What social conditions might have gone along with the physical separation?

How might you account for the differences in a dialect like Black English?

II. Attitudes About Dialects

There are a variety of attitudes toward dialects that are illustrated in the presentation. Many of the participants reveal traditional mainstream attitudes which view the local dialect negatively. However, there are also some attitudes about vernacular dialects that are positive, and reinforce the local usage. In certain contexts, and for particular social values, these attitudes about the community dialect may be surprisingly positive.

A. Prestige

If a group is socially prestigious, then its dialect will also be also prestigious, and if a group is socially stigmatized, then its dialect also will be stigmatized by the mainstream society. Try to get students to see the strength of this association by asking them about the relative prestige of different dialects illustrated on the video.

QUESTIONS:

Are there any dialects that are prestigious in the presentation? Why?

What dialects are socially stigmatized? Why are they stigmatized?

One of the people appearing on the tape says that we “automatically” judge people from the way they talk. Do you agree? Suppose you get a phone call from someone you have never met; would you form an opinion of the person based on speech?

(†) Prestigious speakers are illustrated by the two Boston men discussing Charles Dickens and Jane Austen using the “Brahmin” dialect. Stigmatized dialects are represented by some of the (working) class Blacks, the Boston North End teenager, the two New Orleans women discussing how people think they are beautiful until they open their mouths, and so forth.

B. Dialect Prejudice

(†) **There are certain stereotypes about dialects that have been perpetuated in the media, including Wand the movies. To a large extent, dialect also contributes to the establishment of a caricature.** The Southern journalist comments on the portrayal of Southern characters in early movies, for instance, saying that the character with the Southern accent usually appeared to be less intelligent and was the butt of others’ jokes.

QUESTION:

(†) How have dialects been used to create stereotypes in the movies and the media?

Dialect prejudice can be very strong.

QUESTIONS:

What are some scenes in “American Tongues” that show prejudice against the speech of a particular region, class, or social group?

How do people feel about themselves when they are constantly told that their dialect is inferior? How does the saleswoman from Brooklyn feel about her Brooklyn speech when she travels to different parts of the United States?

Where did your sympathies lie when the New England woman described her feelings about her fiancé’s Southern speech?

C. Dialect Identity

Not all attitudes about local dialects are negative. In fact, these dialects may serve some very important positive functions within a community. Their use can promote a feeling of group solidarity, trustworthiness, and friendliness, all positive attributes.

QUESTIONS:

What are some of the positive reasons for using a local dialect?

In the segment filmed in Kentucky, one man says “I’m just a plain old hillbilly.” Why do you think he says this?

How does Phillip, the North End Boston teenager, use a vernacular dialect to his advantage? Are there other cases where a community dialect is used to an advantage?

Phillip says that he uses his dialect to intimidate people. Have you ever felt intimidated by someone's dialect?

Regional dialects are sometimes used in advertising. These dialects would not be used if the advertiser did not think they would have a positive effect on the audience.

QUESTION:

What positive effect might a regional dialect have in advertising? Are there any particular products that might lend themselves to advertising using a local dialect?

111. The Uses of Standard and Vernacular Dialects

Speaking a standard dialect certainly has advantages in certain settings, but it can also present a dilemma for a person in terms of local community norms. Not everyone needs to speak a standard dialect for all social occasions. Furthermore, there are consequences that go along with the use of both a standard and local dialect.

QUESTIONS:

What are some advantages to speaking a standard dialect? Why does the saleswoman from Brooklyn want to learn a dialect that is not associated with Brooklyn?

The speech therapist says that standard English is strongly associated with the corporate image in our society. Do you agree with him? Why/Why not?

Are there any disadvantages to speaking standard English in certain contexts? (Review the scene in which the Black teenaged girls tease the girl who doesn't "use as much slang" as being a "school girl" and a "mama's girl".)

Can you think of contexts in which a local dialect would be appropriate and a standard dialect would not be appropriate?

Learning a standard dialect can often cause a dilemma for a person because of a conflict between the “out-side” world and the local community.

QUESTIONS:

Phillip’s brother says that Phillip sometimes embarrasses him with his speech. At the same time, Phillip says that he uses his dialect to his advantage. How do these illustrate different forces at work in the choice of a dialect?

A young black woman says that when she is in her professional world, she “corrects” her speech, and when she is with friends, she speaks in a local dialect, reflecting her identity as a Southern girl. Why would she want to maintain both dialects?

Most people adjust their language based on the situation, including their familiarity with people they’re talking to and the formality of the situation.

QUESTIONS:

What advantages may come from being able to shift dialects?

Do you shift dialects depending on where you are and the people you’re talking to? What are some settings where you might shift your dialect?

There are both negative and positive consequences associated with the use of any dialect, whether it is “standard” English or a local nonstandard English variety. Each person must weigh the consequences of different dialects and make choices about appropriate dialect usage on that basis. Dialects are an important aspect of the American heritage representing its different regional, social, and ethnic groups; they also present a dilemma for speakers because of the different values associated with their usage.

Further Reading

There are many works on dialects that might be consulted for the viewer interested in further reading; however, many of these are fairly technical reading for the non-specialist. The series of booklets entitled **Dialects and Educational Equity**, published by the Center for Applied Linguistics and distributed by Prentice-Hall Inc., provides a basic introduction to the issues of dialects in a readable question-answer format. Specific booklets in the series are **Dialogue on Dialects**, **Exploring Dialects**, **Dialects and Reading**, **Dialects and Language Arts**, and **Dialects and Speech Pathology**.

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