WEATHER WORDS IN AMERICAN ENGLISH REGIONAL DIALECTS

Roger A. Pielke

Department of Atmospheric Science
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO

While most of us are exposed daily to the range of different American English accents on television, radio, and in our day-to- day activities, we often do not recognize variations in word usage in different parts of the country. There is even a book on Alaskan English (Tabbert, 1991). Figure 1 illustrates the current delineation of the major American English dialects. These boundaries were determined through surveys of local speech patterns which have evolved differently to some extent within the United States. Such dialects represent the sum total of local characteristics of speech (Neufeldt, 1988), and the use of words to describe weather and climate represent one component of dialect. The familiar Southern dialect boundary extends throughout northern Maryland, west southwestward to the border of Arkansas and Missouri and then southward through eastern Texas. The dialect of the North extends westward from the northeast states out to the western border of Illinois. The boundary then extends westward through central Iowa and northward through the eastern Dakotas. A Western dialect extends to longitudes to the west. Within each major dialect area there are well-defined, more local dialects as illustrated in the figure.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the use of words to describe weather vary between dialect areas. That there are clear distinctions between regions can be illustrated by the weather term, "black ice". In the book *American Talk*, the author, R. Hendrickson (1986) states,

> "Nobody has yet discovered what "black ice" means (it may be a river frozen over so that the water underneath appears black)."

Clearly, the author of this book was not aware of common usage of this word in Oregon, Washington, the Great Lakes region, and the northeast U.S. as reported by F. Cassidy (1985) in the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE), where "black ice" is defined as clear icing on a road surface. This dictionary also refers to a definition of "black ice" as clear ice in a lake for New England and

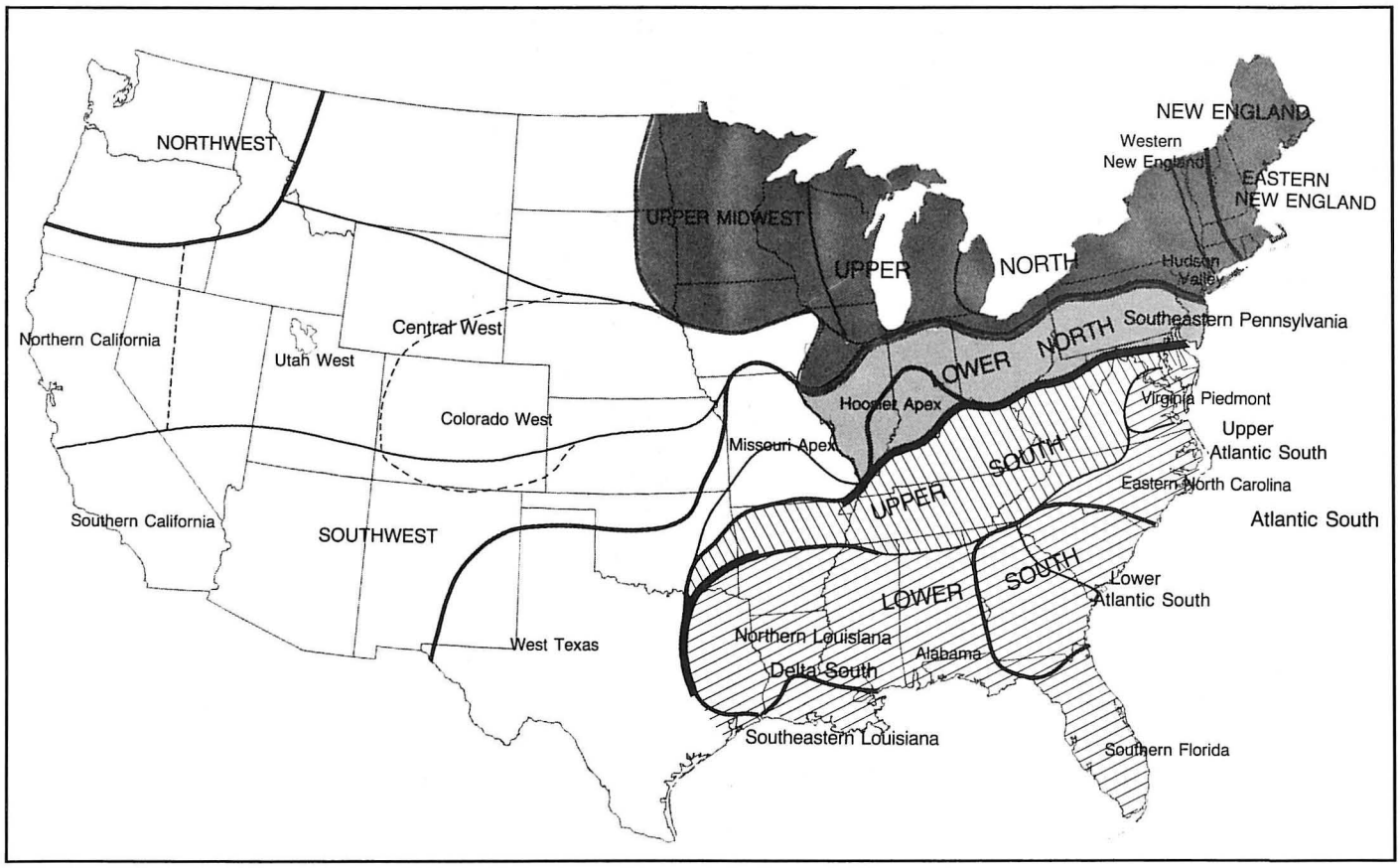

Fig. 1. The major dialect regions of the contiguous United States (from Carver, 1987).

part of the state of New York. Questions asked to compile weather responses for the DARE study are reproduced in Fig. 2.[1]

On Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts, as reported in Hendrickson (1986), the local population divides weather "into *weather overhead* (how the sky appears) and *weather underfoot* (the conditions of roads, etc.)." Local residents of Martha's Vineyard refer to *so'thad winds* (i.e., southerly winds) and *no'thad winds* (i.e., northerly winds).

There are a number of other weather words that are limited in their use and understanding by the public, to specific dialect regions of the United States, as discussed by Carver (1987). In the Eastern New England dialect area, for example, a *tempest* is a rain storm. When a *nor'easter* is developing, locals in this area refer to *breezing up* into a tempest. When the wind begins to diminish, the winds are said to be *lulling down*. In the inland Upper North, a reduction in the wind is referred to as the wind *going down*. The term *mackerel sky* is also commonly used in the northeastern United States. A small amount of snow in this region is referred to as a *skiff* or *dusting* of snow.

In the South, a clearing sky is referred to as *fairs off*, while a weakening wind is said to be *laying*. A chilly winter day is described as *airish* and a severe frost is referred to as a *biting frost*. A heavy downpour is described as a *gullywasher*, while a drizzly rain is called a *misting rain*.

In the western United States, a *chinook* in Washington, Oregon and Idaho refers to a warm, moist wind usually blowing from the southwest. In the northern Rocky Mountain states and in the Dakotas, people refer to a dry, warm wind that blows from the north as a *chinook* (since along the eastern slopes of the Rockies a chinook is generally a westerly strong wind, this perception by the public as reported in the book by Carver is somewhat surprising).

Other examples of local weather words include a *blue norther* (i.e., an arctic cold air outbreak) in the panhandle of Texas, *upslope storms* (easterly winds that are forced uphill resulting in snow and rain) in eastern Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico, *Taku winds* (strong easterly winds which move downslope off the high coastal mountain range) in southeast Alaska, *chubascos* (strong wind squalls from the south) in California and Texas, and *Kona storms* (upper atmospheric low pressure systems) over the Hawaiian Islands.

It has been suggested that weather and climate are one major determinant of these dialect areas in the United States. Presumably, historical migration patterns, diet mandated by what crops can be produced in a region, the clothes that are worn, and animal and vegetation indigenous to a region help explain this dependence of dialect on meteorological conditions. Zelinsky (1973) suggests that the limits of persistent humid, hot summer weather have contributed to the northern and western limits of the southern American English dialect. It is, therefore, perhaps no coincidence that the geographic boundaries of the azalea, a plant that is associated with the South as mentioned in Escott and Goldfield (1991), are also consistent with these climatic boundaries, since azaleas require relatively mild, wet winters and moist, warm summers.

[1]Readers should try to answer these questions themselves and then query their friends and colleagues in other dialect regions of the United States. This could lead to an interesting, if not entertaining, exercise.

Perhaps we in the United States, should expect our language to become more homogenized as people move between regions, and as we are exposed to supermedia communications such as *The Weather Channel* and *USA Today*. However, as shown in recent census surveys, much of the migration is towards larger metropolitan areas, with rural areas receiving a substantially smaller influx. Additional foreign immigrants also tend to settle in specific local areas of the United States, possibly introducing foreign words to English in the process, but only in certain subregions of the country. Moreover, while the mass media expose all of us to a standardized English, many Americans are limited in their conversational dialog to members of their own community, and this helps to perpetuate local dialects. In fact, the different variety and types of weather and climate that occur across the United States may very likely continue to help reinforce the words that are used to describe local and regional atmospheric conditions, thus reinforcing localized dialect regions for some time to come.

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Author

Roger A. Pielke is a Professor of Atmospheric Science at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, CO. His research focuses on mesoscale meteorology and climatology, and on developing improved techniques for weather forecasting. He received a B.S. from Towson State in 1968, and M.S. and Ph.D. degrees from The Pennsylvania State University in 1969 and 1973 respectively.

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