

Satire: A Basic Guide to American Accents

By Curtis Jerry Smothers



American English as spoken in the USA has many regional variations. From northern Maine to southern Mississippi, natives speak differently. This article is a handy guide for visitors (and us Midwesterners, who actually have no accent) to use in deciphering the variations in accents and pronunciation quirks they will encounter as they travel our country.

The Northeastern "Cahs"

In the sentence, "I pahked my cah and went to the pahty," the speaker is describing what action he took with his vehicle before he departed for a celebratory event. A rough translation would be, "I parked my car and went to the party." The speaker could be a man named Cahl, Mahvin, or Rahbut (Carl, Marvin, or Robert). His girlfriend could be Shahlut or Rahbutah. (You get the gist by now, I think.)

The main distinction in our Northeastern accent is the absence of the letter "r" and its substitution with the sound "ah." Also, those folks speak without the aid of any nasality whatsoever, which explains how "New York" can become "Noo Yahk." That pronunciation will not survive adenoidal reverberation.

The Southern “Balks”

Here’s a southern sentence: “Mahmuh, Wretched stole mah balks.”

I shall parse that sentence for you: “Mahmuh” is the speaker’s mother (or, in southern lexicon, the “speakhuh’s muthah”). “Wretched” is the speaker’s brother. Other famous “Wretcheds” were “Wretched Nixon, Wretched Burton,” and the Shakespeare character “Wretched III” (of “Mah keengdum foah a hoahs!” fame).

Lastly, the term “balks” refers to a container, as in “mayutch balks,” where one would find implements to light fires. In the rural South they use “mayutches” in lieu of Zippo “lahdahs.”

When listening for the southerners’ accent and speech patterns, be especially aware of their tendency to make two-syllable words out of one-syllable words. Examples would be “way-ul” (well), “hee-yit” (hit), and “ay-yunt” (aunt), and (or “ay-yund”) that faithful expletive “shee-yit.” (I shall not translate that particular word. Hint: It was used repeatedly in the Watergate tapes by Wretched Nixon.)

California’s Irritable Vowel Sound

Yes, Californians do have an accent; and, no, it is nothing like former Gov. Schwarzenegger. One has to listen carefully to detect the West Coast accent, but it is nevertheless there. California’s ancestors somehow abandoned the long “e” sound somewhere between Donner Pass and San Diego.

Listen carefully and you will detect many odd pronunciations of common English words. For example, Californians would say, “I will yild my shild if I can build my fild on Shilds Avenue.” That would translate back East as “I will yield my shield if I can build my field on Shields Avenue.”

There are other differences in the way those folks out west speak our language, but it is not so much an issue of accent as it is a question of strange usage and syntax. I am referring of course, to the famous “Valley Girl” jabber one might hear in a San Fernando mall: “Eww, lahk, I went ‘Get yew!’ And he goes ‘Yeh, I like to play, you know, the fild.’”

The Midwestern Whore Whose Horse was Hoarse

I said at the beginning of this article that we Midwesterners don’t have an accent; everybody else does. I need to make two caveats to that claim:

1. People from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Dakota, are more linguistically related to Canadians. Those who enjoyed the movie “Fargo” know what I mean, eh?

2. The rest of us Midwesterners do pride ourselves in our distinctive pronunciation of the following words: horse, hoarse, and whores. The latter two (hoarse and whores) are pronounced “hoerz”; the former (horse) is pronounced “hahrse.”

So, if you want to find out if someone is a Midwesterner, ask him or her how the hoarse horse is doing. (You’re on your own with working the word “whores” into the conversation.)