

A Mannah of Speaking in Retreat

Mitt Romney drew some criticism on the campaign trail last spring when he wrestled over the pronunciation of “Missouri.” But some residents of the New England state where he spends his vacations, according to a recent study, have become increasingly uncertain how to pronounce “New Hampshire.”

It used to be that people east of the Green Mountains, which run through the middle of Vermont, reliably called it “New Hampshire.” But in “Farewell to the Founders: Major Dialect Changes Along the East-West New England Border,” a paper in the current issue of the journal *American Speech*, three linguists show that the line separating those who drop their R’s from those who don’t has moved to the east, to the Vermont-New Hampshire border — and, in the case of young people, has even encroached deep into the New Hampshire itself.

And it isn’t just a matter of “non-rhoticity,” the technical name for the speech pattern that makes people “pahk the cah in Hahvahd yahd.” The study’s authors — James N. Stanford, Thomas A. Leddy-Cecere and Kenneth P. Baclawski Jr. — also discovered an erosion of several other distinctive features of eastern New England speech, including the different vowels for “father” and “bother” and for “Mary,” “merry” and “marry.” (The distinction between “horse” and “hoarse,” however, seems to be hanging on.)

“After so many generations of consistent transmission” traceable to 18th-century settlers, the authors declare, “the social patterns laid down by the Founders are now rapidly shifting and dissipating in the current generation.”

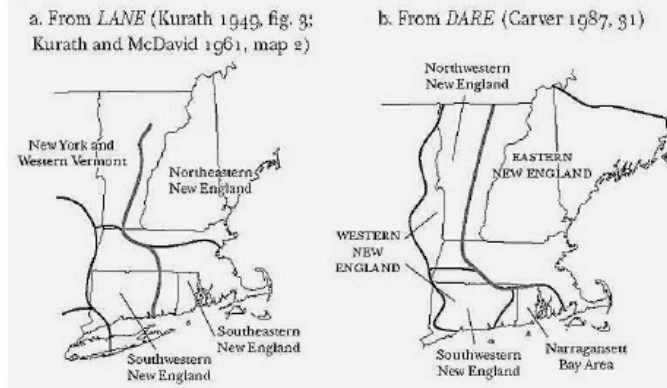
The east-west distinction in northern New England speech was first described in the 1939 *Linguistic Atlas of New England* and held firm in a 1987 study based on data gathered in the 1960s for the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. But during the past decade the current study’s authors — all of whom have long roots in New England — began noting that they heard the distinction less reliably and set out to investigate.

Aided by a team of students from Dartmouth, they began by



JAMES N. STANFORD

FIGURE 2
The Kurath East-West Line



Illustrations from the paper “Farewell to the Founders: Major Dialect Changes Along the East-West New England Border,” showing the linguistic divisions in maps as well as in menus.

doing two sets of interviews: first with 39 elderly people from across New Hampshire and Vermont, and another with 23 young and old speakers in Claremont, N.H., near the Vermont border. Participants were asked to read a list of words and sentences along with part of a text called “How to Survive a New England Winter.”

After careful acoustical analysis, the authors arrived at a clear conclusion: The east-west speech border had moved from the Green Mountains to the Vermont-New Hampshire border, and among the young it seemed close to vanishing altogether. Some of the change, the authors suggest, is deliberate, as people seek to avoid the stigma of sounding like they come from the “backwoods” — or perhaps worse, Boston. Asked whether she ever dropped R’s or used other eastern New England variants, one young Claremont wom-

an told the researchers, “Only when mocking someone from Massachusetts.”

The study is not without its political implications. The emergence of the rhotic R in New Hampshire, the researchers suggest, may reflect the spread of the “Live Free or Die” mentality that has crept north as refugees from “Taxachusetts” seek linguistic as well as economic independence. But the survival of more subtle eastern dialect features like the horse/hoarse distinction, the authors write, may also reflect an emerging “modern northern New Englander identity” untethered to traditional rural culture.

As Mr. Leddy-Cecere, a New England native now teaching at the University of Texas, is quoted as saying in the paper: “I’m not an Old Vermonter. But I’m not a flatlander either. I’m a Vermonter.” JENNIFER SCHUESSLER