THE REPRESENTATION OF AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS IN PRIME TIME NETWORK TELEVISION DRAMATIC PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

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This research project develops a working hypothesis about the role of the mass media in influencing dialect distributions in large, complex societies. It is proposed that dramatic programs are a crucial component in this process by imbuing particular dialects with particular values in association with particular kinds of fictional characters. As audiences consume mass media drama they may assimilate attitudes toward speech varieties that are congruent with the portrayals of fictional characters who speak them, with the potential that these attitudes may in some way influence their own behavior.

A method is developed to analyze the television drama message regarding dialects of American English and an analysis of over 1100 characters from a sample of over 60 hours of prime time network television dramatic programming is undertaken to specify relationships between dialects used by characters and other character traits. It is found that Northern "R-ful" varieties of American English are not only grossly overrepresented by are also clearly marked as relatively prestigious.

To estimate the extent to which this representational bias has entered into attitudes toward dialects in different dialect regions of the United States a small
scale survey was devised in the form of a self-administered evaluational response test using six speakers (three male-female pairs providing North Midland, South Midland, and Black accented speech) on tape as stimuli. The test was mailed to teachers at five regional universities and was given to a total of 127 students. Asked to rate the speakers on several semantic differential scales in terms of what kind of character would be most appropriate for each speaker, some evidence for general agreement favoring the North Midland accent in prestige valuing was gathered.

It is concluded that the television message bestows prestige value on Northern "R-ful" varieties of American English and is reflected in attitudes shared in different dialect regions. The significance of the pan-regional influence of the mass media for sociolinguistic inquiry into issues of language change and cultural hegemony is indicated.