Transcript: Accent Expert Gives a Tour of U.S. Accents

New York City, Trenton,
North Carolina, Ocracoke Island,
Mississippi and Northern Florida.
That's where you gets the sort of Blanche DuBois
or Scarlett O'Hara kind of classical Southern accent.
Hi, my name is Erik Singer.
I'm a dialect coach.
Today we're gonna take a little tour
of some of the different accents
of English speaking North America.
[upbeat music]
Now a couple of quick disclaimers.
This are by no means all the accents in North America
or even all the English speaking ones.
And not everyone from the same place,
sounds the same accents vary by socioeconomic background,
generation, ethnicity and race,
and all kinds of individual factors.
Because in a very real way,
accent is identity.
Different people from the same place
have more or less localizable accents.
And that usually has to do with identity too.
Now on some of our stops,
we're going to be looking at some of the most distinctive
and interesting local features
but it doesn't mean that everyone from there
has that accent or has it to the same degree.
I'm also going to have some linguists
and language experts from around the continent.
Join me today to lend their expertise
in some of these areas.
Hi, I'm Megan Figueroa.
Hi, I'm Nicole
Peace, I'm Sunn m'Cheaux.
Hi, I'm Kalina.
Hi, I'm Amani Dorn.
One of the things you'll notice along the way

is that accents often don't follow political boundaries
especially once like state lines.
They'll follow major geographical boundaries
things like mountains, for sure
but what regional accent differences
mostly reflect is settlement patterns and contact.
Historically isolated communities
like Ocracoke Island in the outer banks of North Carolina
or the sea islands in the low country in Georgia
can have really distinctive speech ways.
They've had the time
and isolation necessary to diverge and develop them.
That's the other thing that makes for accent variety.
Time.
There's a lot more accent diversity in the British Isles,
for example, where there are local populations
that have been speaking English
in their particular way for hundreds and hundreds of years.
And there's more accent diversity
on the East coast of the US
than there is West of the Mississippi.
It's been settled by English speakers longer.
The first places English was spoken in North America
were Roanoke, Jamestown and of course,
Plymouth Massachusetts,
where the pilgrims landed in 1620.
So let's start there.
The Pilgrim spoke with what we call RHOTIC accents
meaning they said all their R's.
In fact, so did almost all English speakers in 1620
including the ones in England.
That's right.
The Southern English accent
might have used to sound something like this.
It was only in the late 18th century
that fashionable young people
in and around London started dropping their R's.
And from there the trend spread to America.
Now North of Plymouth rock, we have a Harvard Yard.
One of the places you might hear a Boston accent today.
Stereotypical Boston accents of course a non RHODIC

meaning no 'r' sounds,
in Pack your car in Harvard yard.
Let's all get in the car and head South down the coast now,
into Rhode Island.
Traditional Rhode Island accents is still non RHOTIC
but there's a key vowel difference.
The placement for that vowel sound
in Park your car in Harvard Yard.
we call this the start vowel.
In Boston It's usually pretty fronted
Park your car in Harvard Yard.
and Rhode Island, its back
Park your car in Harvard Yard.
/a/ /a /
Rhode Island accents were shaped by a lot of Irish
and Italian immigration, just like New York city.
So many accents.
They don't vary buy borough by the way, that's a myth.
I know you guys are going to tell me to forget about it
but I'm sorry.
Socio linguists have studied this really carefully.
And there just really isn't any such thing
as a specifically, Brooklyn
or specifically Bronx accent.
There's certainly are a lot of different
New York city accents.
But they varied by socioeconomic background
and by ethnicity and other aspects of group belonging
and identity more than by neighborhood or by borough.
Their historically non RHOTIC
though that's changing some
in the youngest generations for sure.
Here is something fun most of them have in common.
The tongue tip hits the teeth or close to them
on T D and N sounds instead of
you know, a little further back.
So you can hear that
in like this kind of New York City accent
tongue tip on the teeth.
Times Square, New York City and this kind of New York accent
22nd street, Time Square, Dumbo, taxis, traffic, and so on.

Okay.
So, you may have noticed that
all of these accents I've talked about so far
sound pretty
white.
I'm going to take a pause here.
And linguist Nicole Holliday is going to go a little deeper
on African American English varieties.
My colleague Amani Dorn
is going to demonstrate some of those accents.
Hi, I'm Nicole Holliday.
And I'm a linguist.
As we know, New York has all kinds of people in it.
African American English has a lot
of shared features across regions because of its history.
So black people in Africa were kidnapped
and brought to what is now the United States.
At the time, they didn't all speak the same languages.
They spoke multiple different African languages
and those languages came into contact,
not only with each other,
but those languages were also coming
into contact with the English spoken by the colonizers.
This created a situation where there was a really unusual
learning exposure to English, right?
So there are all of these languages in contact
with each other and for economic and survival reasons
the enslaved people had to, in some ways acquire English.
But the English that they were acquiring was not
like what you learned in the classroom, right?
It was under this really unusual situation of acquisition.
So some of the features that we see
in modern African American English
are a result of this contact between the African languages
as well as the English spoken by colonizers.
And those features have persisted
over generations.
After slavery was legally ended.
The majority of African Americans remained in the South
but experienced really extreme segregation.
This led to different varieties of English being spoken

in black and white communities within the South.
And even they moved North during the great migration.
Nicole, how did the great migration influence accents?
The English that we see today
spoken by African Americans
has some features that have persisted
throughout generations.
'Th' stopping.
So that might be using something like a 'D' sound
for where you see a written 'Th'
So dat, for that.
You can hear that in this clip.
They said I could participate online.
They said I could, they said I could.
They said I could participate online.
'L' vocalization.
So that's an L turning into a vowel
in a word like pool or pull
might sound something like pool or pull.
You said that's cool, cool, cool, cool.
That's cool.
We also see consonant cluster simplification.
If you have a series of consonants at the end of a word
you might see them turn into just one consonant.
So in a word like West
you might hear it pronounced as West.
It's been a minute, but she just left.
She just left.
She just left.
And anything specific to New York.
One feature common in New York City
is what we call a raised vowel in words like thought
and cloth.
It sounds something like awe.
Coffee without froth on top isn't coffee at all.
So let's get it together.
Okay, let's go back to Erik.
Thank you, Nicole.
And even that's just the tip of the iceberg
for linguistic diversity in this incredibly diverse city.
Around 50% of New Yorkers

speak languages other than English at home.
And for half of those, that language is Spanish.
Megan Figueroa is here to tell us a little bit
about one of those varieties.
A variety linguists call New York, Latino English.
New York, Latino English is heavily influenced by
Puerto Rican Spanish and Dominican Spanish.
One remarkable feature of this variety is a light L
the sound that you would find in a word like, like love leaf
Right.
So New York Latino English speakers have a particularly
light L, you can hear that in this native speaker clip.
I guess growing up, I know what it's like
to not have a lot.
I know what it's like to not have a lot, lot, lot.
In contrast to the light L when you produce the dark L
the back of your tongue bunches.
So think about the words, milk
and pull
the lighter L was a feature of New York, Latino English.
But Latinex people are a very diverse group of people
and they speak a variety of varieties.
We'll get some more of those.
Thank you, Megan.
And this single feature is a good contrast
with other New York accents, by the way.
Because most of the New York accents have pretty dark L's.
Lots of lemon lollipops, LA LA.
I like to lick them.
So now as we leave New York
and had South in to Jersey and towards Philadelphia
we crossed a major dialect boundary, the On Line.
And North of this line.
Most people say 'an' rimes with 'don'
South of it they say 'on' rimes with 'down'.
Of course, this doesn't apply at all.
If you rhyme on and down
only if you have two distinct pronunciations.
That's called the Cot-caught merger.
But we'll talk more about that later.
There were a few major dialects areas in the US

and one of the biggest dividing lines is
between Northern dialects and Midland dialects.
The On line basically runs right along this boundary.
So as we cross over at somewhere around Trenton
we've crossed from the North to the Midlands dialect wise.
Now another thing that starts to happen
as we get down towards Philly
is that the goat diphthong
starts to move forwards in the mouth.
So we get go, hoagies.
You want to get get some hoagies?
Go gets maybe even a little further forward,
as we get down to Baltimore,
especially you know, down the ocean.
You want to get down the ocean on Wednesday.
Let's make a quick stop in DC
where Nicole has some really interesting stuff
on the prosody of local African American speakers.
[piano music]
In my research, I study Prosody.
Which has to do with the tone
and intonation of the phrase itself.
In a study, i found that African-American speakers
may be more likely to ask a yes, no question
with a level tone or a falling tone.
For white speakers, we expect a rising tone
in questions like these.
So something like, Did you do the dishes?
But African American speakers
maybe more likely to say something like,
Did you do the dishes?
Another feature that we see in DC
similar to New York
is the raised thought cloth vowel that, ah
this is a new feature in DC.
And we think it's part of a pattern
of DC varieties becoming more like Northern cities
as opposed to the South.
You can hear that in this clip.
Change is needed, but at what cost?
at what cost, cost.

Okay, let's go back to Eric.
Now we take a quick detour over to Pittsburgh.
This are the only people in all of North America
that smooth the mouth diphthong,
except for maybe Chicago, sometimes
the smoothing is when you take a diphthong
like Oh, and smooth it out.
So it's just one sound ah,
just like we have price smoothing in much to the South
so that 'I' smooths out to just 'ah' price,
same thing here
except with the mouth vowel
smoothing out to 'a' long a sound.
You guys wanna to meet down town, go shopping for couches?
Heading back over to the Delmarva Peninsula.
As we head down into Virginia
we get something different happening
with that same mouth diphthong.
Here It's gonna sound like Oh, mouth, house.
So it's not smoothing out here, It's raising.
The tongue starts a little higher up 'oh'
instead of 'a' so it's like Oh, Oh about, house
this feature's called Tidewater raising
something similar happens with this vowel in Canada.
And there we call it Canadian raisin
but it's essentially the same thing happening.
Time to get out of the house, Keep heading South.
Down in North Carolina,
we're really starting to hear
pretty significant goat fronting again.
So the vowel sound in boat, most, hope,
starts with a tongue further forwards in the mouth.
Oh, interestingly goat fronting,
which is now widespread in a lot of the American South
seems to have originated in North Carolina
sometime in the last part of the 19th century.
Remember that regional dialect boundaries
don't necessarily follow political boundaries.
They follow patterns
and contact patterns between populations.
So the inland part of North Carolina

which is in the Appalachian Highlands
the original European settlers were scotch Irish folks
and Germans moving Southwest from Pennsylvania
due to being relatively inaccessible
and isolated for a long time.
That say is distinct
from the lowlands and from the coastal areas.
The isolated speech communities are fascinating
because we can get some really interesting sound patterns.
Up here it gets really gets really dramatic
Face lowering, for example.
So the diphthong in face starts real low down around, 'e'
'a'
face
late, day.
You'll also get some particular dialect features.
So words and word order and grammar things
that stretch way back to those original settlers
from Scotland and Northern Ireland.
Things like; a-huntin and a-fishin efficient and extra sounds too
like the 'R' sound in wash and the 'H' sound in it,
get on with it.
Here's Nicole again,
to talk a little bit about African-American speech
in Southern Appalachia
Hi Again.
So African Americans in Appalachia
are understudied
mostly because stereotypes of Appalachia are very very white
African Americans
in Appalachia may be more likely to be RHOTIC.
So in words like floor
Why up there on the fourth floor?
fourth floor, floor, floor
you'll get the 'R' whereas in other places
you might get floor African-Americans in Appalachia,
also tend to follow the more general Southern pattern
with respect to I monophthongization
'a' in wide turning to 'a' so you get wide.
And now the map tour continues with Erik.
Thank you, Nicole.

We're picking up again in North Carolina
over in the outer banks.
There's an even more historically isolated community
because of a shift in shipping patterns
in the mid 19th century.
And probably also
because of sympathizing with the Northern cause
in the Civil War
Ocracoke Island was relatively isolated
from the mainland for a long time.
It developed maybe one of the most distinctive
and different dialects in North America.
Obliging Islanders would sometimes say to tourists,
Well its high tide on the sound side.
Last night the water fire, tonight the moon shine.
No fish.
Ocracoke Islanders are sometimes called high tiders,
because of that particularly distinctive 'hoi' sound
and their accent is sometimes take it be British
or Australian, even by Brits.
The truth be told there are some similarities
with some regional English accents
including that 'hoi toide' vowel sound,
which is similar to both Southwestern English accents
like Devon or Gloucestershire
and East Anglian accents like Norfolk and Suffolk
those Eastern most counties of England.
Curiously,
another distinctive thing about the old Ocracoke accent,
is its also got a real sort of bounce to it
which is something that both those Southwestern
and those East Anglian accents also have in common.
North Carolina's actually one of the most linguistically
diverse States in the country.
I want to bring in Kalina Newmark now
to talk about Native American English.
Hello, my name is Kalina Newmark,
and I am Tulita Dene First Nation
from the Northwest territories Canada.
I come from a strong line of Dene and Métis leaders
who are passionate about our language

and cultural teachings.
The Lumbee tribe is a largest state recognized
Native American tribe in North Carolina,
Lumbee speakers combined and pronounce
English words that distinguish them from African American
and Southern speakers.
Since encountering white settlers in the mid 18 hundreds
the Lumbee have carved out a dialect of English
that is uniquely theirs.
One interesting feature is that Lumbee English speakers
share vowel sounds present in the outer banks accent
where tied is pronounced toyed.
You can hear that in this native speaker clip.
Well when he got half way got little ditch on this side
ditch on this side, ditch on this side
Thank you Kalina.
So that Ocracoke Island high titer accent
is an accent that's disappearing fast
the younger Ocracokers tend to speak much more
mainstream American English.
There's a popular idea that we're losing regional accents
that people are sounding more and more similar.
That's true of some people in some places
especially some of these isolated communities
but it's not true across the board.
There are actually plenty of accent differences
that are getting more and more distinct over time.
But of course, it's a complex picture.
There are parts of the South that
don't have all that much Southern about them
accent wise.
Raleigh, North Carolina and Austin Texas
are two good examples.
A lot of people
from those two cities may be pretty hard to identify
by their accents,
which brings us to what is sometimes called
general American, what's general American?
The first thing, is it's not one accent.
It's basically a terrible term for a wide variety of accents
that essentially

don't have a lot of obvious
regionally distinctive features in them.
We're going to talk to Sunn M'cheaux now.
Sunn is a native speaker of Gullah
a fascinating and really important Creole language
spoken in the low countries in the Carolinas, Georgia
and Florida.
Gullah is a language spoken
in a region of the United States
called the Gullah Geechee cultural heritage corridor.
Which extends officially from Wilmington, North Carolina
down to Jacksonville, Florida.
Gullah is an Atlantic Creole.
Most similar with Bohemian Creole English
and Beijing Creole.
In fact, when I visited the Bahamas
A bunch of the locals thought that I been a local too.
There are a variety of factors that informed the language.
For instance, the secluded plantations on the sea Island
a mixture of African languages, as well as the accents
of lower class English and Irish indentured servants
and slavers.
European slavers were so ill suited
for the sea islands environment
that they would often afford long periods of solitary time
to our ancestors with little to no oversight.
Slavers would mismatch the languages
in order to confound them
and hindered their ability to organize rebellions.
Now, the scheme of this tactic was designed for
our Gullah Geechee ancestors to be forced to speak English
so that their overseers
could be prevented of communications.
But what slavers didn't predict
is that this first generation English base African pigeon
put development to our Creole.
A fully mature rule govern language of its own,
much of which remains with us today
due to generations of forced segregation
and eventual separation by choice,
before the building of bridges

that increased easy access to and fro.
I'm going to walk you through a few distinct features
of the Gullah Geechee accent.
For example,
the kit foot vowels a reverse for the words, fish and foot.
To sound like fish and foot
The lot trap vowels are reverse for God
and Pat to sound like Gad and pot.
The softening of the T's
where butter and bent would sound like butter and bent.
Gullah speakers also dropped consonants for vowels
where the two words meet.
For instance; in the sentence,
that girl there and that boy there,
the word for their 'dere' as a subtracts
the D depending on if there's a consonant or a vowel
proceeding it.
The importance of accent to the Gullah Geechee language
simply cannot be overstated.
It is the clearest bond between ourselves and
other displaced Africans throughout colonized spaces
and the black diaspora.
How we sound is as important as what we say
because an accent is a statement in itself.
This has been your Gullah teacher Sunn m'Cheaux.
Stay safe and as always we out yah,
peace. - Thank you so much Sunn.
So if you're keeping count,
that's six Southern accents already,
even though we're not being remotely comprehensive here.
And we've only been through a few States,
lots more to come.
As we get into the Piney woods Belt.
Southern Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi
and Northern Florida.
We're getting into one of the parts of the South
that's always been RHOTIC.
A lot of the South was historically non RHOTIC.
That's where you get this sort of Blanche DuBois,
or Scarlett O'Hara kind of classical Southern accent.
You can hear that in this clip here.

I always depended on the kindness
of strangers.
You hear how there is no 'r' in strangers?
Strange, Strange, stranger.
That's a non RHOTIC accent,
but that's changed
and changed fast over the last few decades.
So most younger white southerners are now RHOTIC.
In most of the Piney woods Belt though,
they always have been.
And Nicole talked about the fact that
some African American speakers in Southern Appalachian
smooth out the 'I' diphthong
the price Vowel, in some words,
and we got along 'a' sound,
but in other words, it stays a diphthong 'I'.
And this is a pattern we find in a lot of the South
and most of the Piney woods Belt though,
there's always been what we can describe as
full price smoothing.
Where some southerners smooth, the diphthong
in words like fly, rise, ride,
but use diphthong in rice and right
here in the Piney woods Belt,
we're going to smooth them all
fly, rise, rod
and rice, rat laugh, not.
And so on.
There's an interest in posture thing here too,
which is then you start to get tongue tips
that are very edge focused.
And what I mean by that is that;
instead of using this part of the tongue,
the blade
for things like T and D sounds
so that there's a lot of surface contact
/t/ /d/
we just use the narrow edge of the tongue.
So it's a more focused contact area
/t/ /d/
tan, tired, turtles.

Talk about dentists.
We're going to end part one right here
but we're going to continue this
all the way across the continent.
We're going to go to Chicago
and Southern California and yes, absolutely.
[upbeat music]
We'll get out in a boat up in Canada.
See you next time for part two.