

English Dialects ^[1]

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by Matthew C. Porter, 2006

See also: [Hoi Toiders](#) ^[2]; [Language Tells NC History](#) ^[3]; [Lumbee Indians - Part 6: Language and culture](#) ^[4]; [Cherokee language](#) ^[5]; [Gaelic Language](#) ^[6]; [Language & Storytelling](#) ^[7]

The English language in North Carolina has been growing and evolving since 1584, when the first English explorers to visit North America came to the [Outer Banks](#) ^[8], making it the first place in the New World where English was spoken. Over the next four centuries, as those first explorations led to the arrival of the colonists who would begin populating the state, the various forms or dialects of English they brought with them became the basis for the English language as it is written and spoken in North Carolina today.

Although there are a number of recognizable English dialects spoken in the state, three predominate. First is the dialect referred to as Lower Southern, which is common in eastern and central North Carolina in a broad swath stretching from the [coast](#) ^[9] through the [Piedmont](#) ^[10]. This southern dialect is what many people think of when they hear the term "southern" or "plantation" English, and it is spoken by people in the Coastal Plain and Piedmont regions of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina and in the Coastal Plain of Georgia. A second southern dialect, known as Upper Southern, is commonly spoken in the western part of the state and in the [Mountain regions](#) ^[11] of West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The third important dialect in North Carolina is [African American](#) ^[12] English, known more recently as Ebonics, which is spoken by large numbers of African Americans who were born and raised in the state or other parts of the South. Despite the difficulty in pinpointing the origins of African American English, recent scholarship theorizes that it is the linguistic product of interactions between English as it was spoken in the South in the eighteenth century and the West African languages spoken by newly arrived slaves.

Although there are no great differences between the dialects spoken by North Carolinians living near the coast and those living in the western parts of the state, the subtle differences that do exist are traceable to immigration patterns, the history of the state's settlement, and the economic and social differences—both real and perceived—between eastern and western North Carolina. Most of those who settled in the Coastal Plain and Piedmont regions of the state arrived directly from England, bringing with them various dialects of what can be called Modern English. Because settlers coming from diverse regions in England (where there are easily recognizable differences between regional and class dialects) often commingled after coming to North Carolina, the distinctions between the dialects gradually blurred to form the distinctive eastern North Carolina dialect.

The [settlement patterns](#) ^[13] of the western parts of the state differ greatly from those of the east. The primary settlers of the Mountains were Scotch-Irish rather than English, and many of them migrated from Europe to Pennsylvania and then moved southward to the North Carolina Mountains. As a result of the migration pattern and their meetings with pockets of German settlers, the hardy souls who first populated western North Carolina developed a slightly different dialect from the one that is heard in the Piedmont or Coastal Plain. One distinctive feature of the language as it is spoken in the western parts of the state lies in the more widespread use of folk and colloquial expressions.

In addition to the three primary dialects, linguists working with [North Carolina State University's](#) ^[14] [North Carolina Language and Life](#) ^[15] [program](#) ^[15] have identified several others that, while they are not spoken by large numbers of people, comprise linguistically distinct dialects and offer some insight into the state's history. These include the dialect spoken by the "Hoi Toiders," longtime residents of Ocracoke Island and Harkers Island, which, until recently, had remained somewhat isolated from the rest of the state because of their inaccessibility. In addition, linguists have identified and begun to measure and record the distinctive dialects spoken by the [Lumbee Indians](#), ^[16] who live primarily in the southeastern part of the state, and the [Cherokee Indians](#) ^[17], who live on and near the reservation in the state's westernmost corner. Furthermore, recent immigration to North Carolina by large numbers of [Hispanic](#) ^[18] and Vietnamese (Hmong) immigrants have sparked two new variations of English.

References:

Norman E. Eliason, *Tarheel Talk: A Historical Study of the English Language in North Carolina to 1860*(1956).

Walt Wolfram and Natalie Shilling-Estes, *Hoi Toide on the Outer Banks: The Story of the Ocracoke Brogue*(1997).

Additional Resources:

North Carolina State University, Language and Life Program: <https://www.ncsu.edu/linguistics/ncllp/> [15]

Dialect Quiz, NC, Language and Life Program: <https://www.ncsu.edu/linguistics/ncllp/dialectquiz.php> [19]

Voices of North Carolina, UNC-TV: <http://www.unctv.org/voicesofnc/> [20]

Video Credit:

Cherokee Language excerpt from *Voices of North Carolina*. Uploaded by NCLLP on September 3, 2008. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ecm_Dlpocl0 [21] (accessed July 30, 2012).

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