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7.2 Dialect geography

Before the nineteenth century, linguists in Europe had largely confined their attention to dead languages like Latin and ancient Greek and to the standard forms of modern languages like English, French, and German. More than a few linguists shared the common perception that non-standard regional varieties were nothing but ignorant and debased versions of the standard forms, unworthy of serious attention. In that century, however, there occurred one of the great developments in the history of linguistics: a number of scholars began to realize that regional forms were just as worthy of study as standard forms, and they turned their attention to constructing good linguistic descriptions of regional variation.

One way of doing this, of course, is to write grammars and dictionaries of regional dialects, and this approach was initiated by Johannes Schmeller, who in 1821 published a grammar of his own Bavarian dialect of German. This kind of valuable work is still with us; for example, the Walloon passage above is taken from an article on a dictionary of Walloon published in 1994. Here, though, I want to concentrate on another approach, the one called **dialect geography**.

Dialect geography consists of the painstaking collection of the regional forms used at intervals across a large area. Naturally, since variation is virtually limitless, the investigators must decide in advance which particular items they will look at and collect information on. They may decide to ask for the local name of the building that cows are kept in at night, or of a sliver of wood caught in a finger. They may be interested in the particular vowel sounds used in particular words, or in the particular grammatical forms of verbs or nouns. Such data must be collected by interviewing local people, and this calls for carefully designed techniques of elicitation, since people tend to get nervous when questioned by outsiders, and may be inclined to give what they hope are the 'right' answers, rather than what they actually say.

Around the middle of the century, a number of people threw themselves into such work in various parts of Europe. For example, the French amateur linguist Prince L. L. Bonaparte (nephew of Napoleon) collected data on the regional dialects of Basque and published in 1869 a map showing his classification of the language into regional dialects. These early efforts, however, were somewhat unsophisticated, and it took several decades to work out reliable procedures.

The German Georg Wenker introduced the questionnaire approach: he sent out questionnaires to schoolteachers in nearly 50 000 localities in Germany and asked for the local equivalents of standard German sentences. This had the advantage of producing a huge volume of data (so much, in fact, that Wenker's results have still not been fully published), but the disadvantage that the schoolteachers, having no training, were highly inconsistent in their reporting and perhaps not always reliable.

Observing the difficulties with Wenker's approach, the French linguist Jules Gilliéron tried another technique. He trained a single worker, Edmond Edmont, in the skills of collecting information by personal interview. Edmont, who proved to be a talented and reliable investigator, then spent the years between 1896 and 1900 cycling around France, stopping in a total of 639 localities to make friends with the local people and ask his questions. While this programme produced a much smaller corpus of data, it had the great advantage that the data were completely consistent and very reliable. Gilliéron managed to collate Edmont's findings and to publish them in full by 1910.

And how does one publish such data? They could be published merely as lists, but dialect geographers have always preferred another type of presentation, more laborious and expensive but far more illuminating: the preparation of **dialect maps**. A single dialect map shows the regional variants found for a single linguistic variable – the local words for 'dragonfly' or 'headache', the local pronunciations of the word *arm* or *girl*, or whatever. Each locality covered is marked on the map with a symbol which represents its particular form; localities using the same form get the same symbol. If the boundary between two neighbouring forms turns out to be rather sharp, a line called an **isogloss** may be drawn on the map to show that boundary. Most often, the results of such a study are presented in a volume of dialect maps, a **dialect atlas**. Such atlases now exist for France, for Germany (only in part), for England, for the eastern USA, and for some other areas. The production of dialect atlases revolutionized linguistics by revealing for the first time clear evidence of the long accumulation of regional changes which I have been discussing in this chapter: each map provides a kind of snapshot of the linguistic position at the moment the data were collected. Ideally, of course, we would like to have a series of such snapshots taken at intervals of a generation or so, in order to see how the maps change, as local forms expand or contract their territory, as some disappear altogether while new forms appear and begin to spread out. Such is the cost of this work, however, both in time and in money, that we can almost never do this.

Here are some examples of dialect maps. Fig. 7.1 shows the past tense of the verb *dive* in the eastern USA, with its regional variants *dived*, *dove* (rhymes with *drove*), *duv* (rhymes with *love*), and *div* (rhymes with *sieve*). In this case, as you can see, the boundaries between competing forms are somewhat blurred, and sharp isoglosses are hard to draw.

Fig. 7.2 likewise shows the past tense of *see* in England. This time the investigators have felt able to draw isoglosses between the neighbouring forms.

Dialect maps are unquestionably of great value in displaying real language data in a vivid graphical manner. However, if you leaf through the pages of a dialect atlas and try to compare some of the maps, you will quickly notice something striking: the isoglosses on one map typically bear no relation to the isoglosses on the next. (Check this for yourself if your library has a dialect

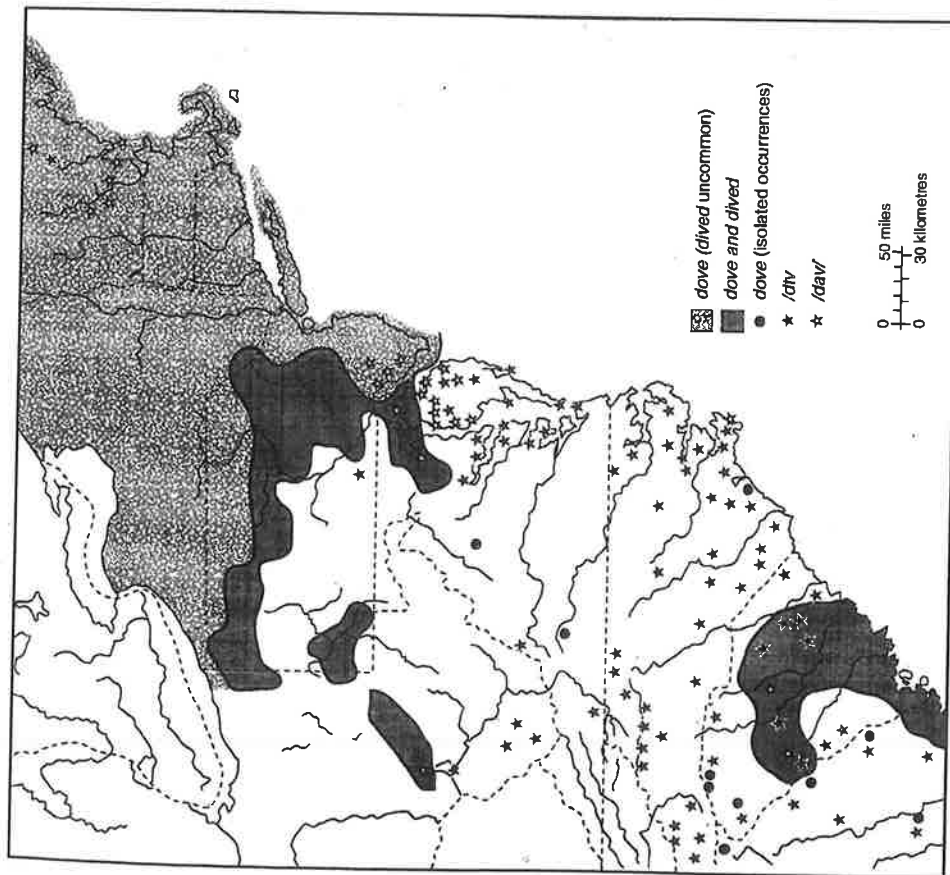


Fig. 7.1 The past tense of *dive* in the eastern USA
(Source: Atwood 1953: fig. 6)

atlas in it.) Rather, each particular linguistic form extends over its own particular area, and it doesn't seem to pay any attention to what other forms are doing. Nevertheless, if you lay dozens and dozens of dialect maps of the same region on top of one another, some structure will begin to emerge. In particular, you will sometimes find that a significant number of isoglosses lie very close together over much of their length. We call this state of affairs an isogloss bundle, and an isogloss bundle is the closest thing we normally find to a division between distinct dialects. For example, Fig. 7.3 shows the southern limit of six different words and forms in the French-speaking area. The six isoglosses correspond exactly only along the River Garonne in the

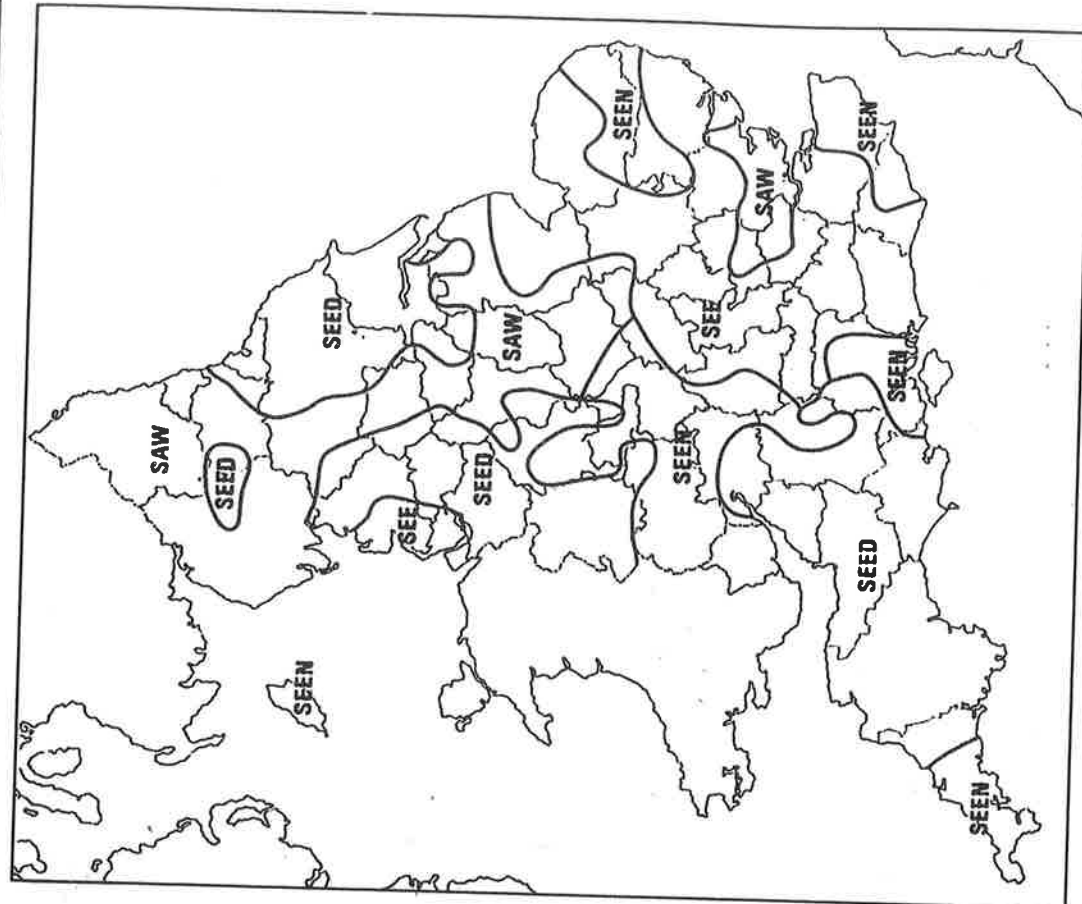


Fig. 7.2 The past tense of *see* in England
(Source: Upton et al. 1987: map 139)

west, which forms a natural boundary; elsewhere they follow somewhat different courses, but, as you can see, they all stay close enough together to constitute an isogloss bundle. Therefore we may provisionally conclude that this bundle represents a major boundary between the speech of the north and that of the south – and in fact we are looking at the most famous linguistic boundary in France: that between the *langue d'oïl* in the north and the *langue d'oc* in the south, so called from their different words for 'yes'.

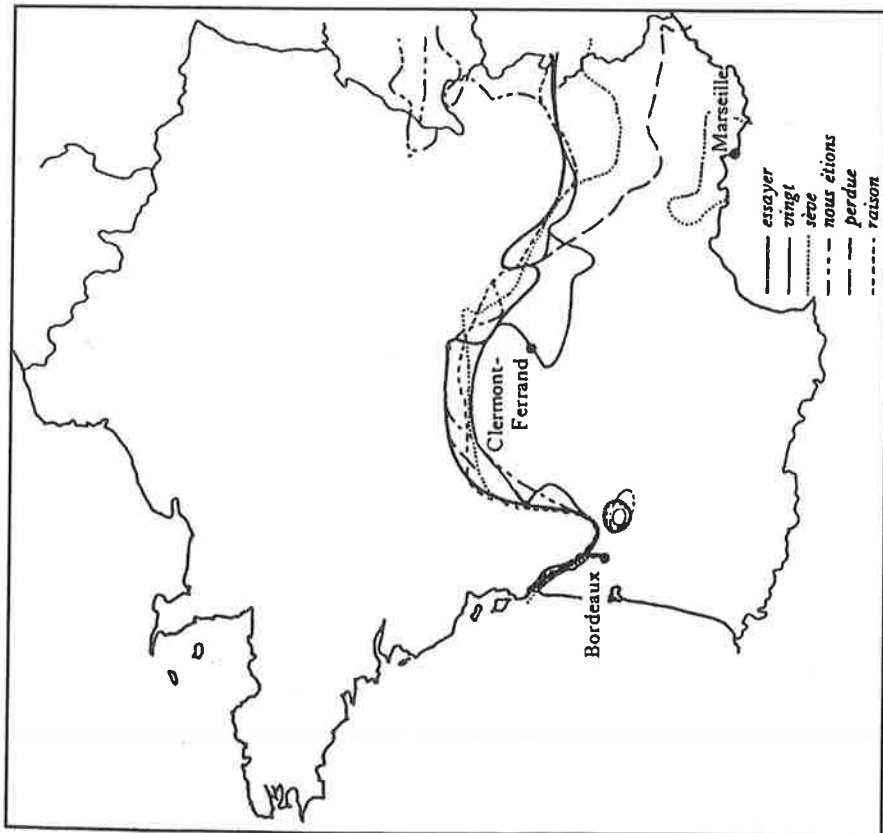


Fig. 7.3 An isogloss bundle in France
(Source: Chambers and Trudgill 1980: map 7.6)

By taking advantage of the presence of such isogloss bundles, dialectologists have succeeded in classifying a number of major languages into fairly well-defined dialects, each with a number of identifiable characteristics. For example, Figs 7.4 and 7.5 show the conventional division into dialects of English in England and in the eastern USA, respectively. (Wales and the Scottish highlands are excluded because English either has been introduced only very recently or is still a second language.)

In each case, the map broadly confirms the popular perception of the existence of 'northern', 'midland', and 'southern' dialects, though the boundaries that emerge from compiling isogloss bundles do not always match our preconceptions perfectly. In particular, the boundaries between the northern and midland dialects in both countries are perhaps somewhat farther north than we might have expected, suggesting that we are probably inclined to

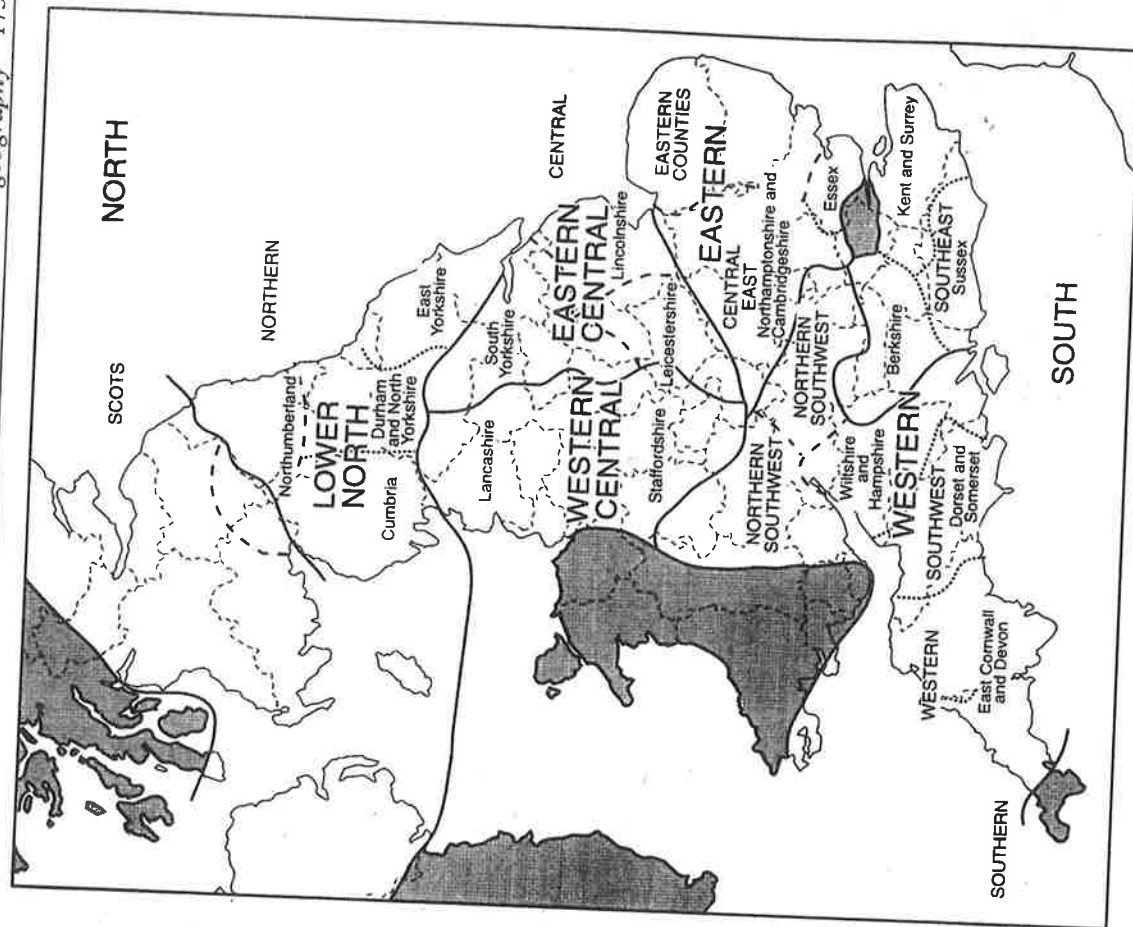


Fig. 7.4 The major dialect areas of England
(Source: Trudgill 1990: map 9)

attach greater weight to certain features than to others in deciding for ourselves whether we are hearing 'northern' or 'midland' speech.

In fact, specialists have further divided each of the three main dialect areas into a number of smaller sub-dialects, only a few of which are shown on the maps, though in the USA these further subdivisions are confined to the eastern and southern coasts; elsewhere the very recent introduction of English and its

of a language. And what would be the outcome if such regional changes were to accumulate without limit for centuries – for example, in English? Easy: the regional varieties of English would eventually become so different from one another that they would cease to be mutually comprehensible at all, and would be forced to speak, not of different dialects, but of different languages. It is possible that English will not now break up into several distinct languages, thanks to the enormous advances in transport and communication which we have seen in recent decades, but it would have happened otherwise. And it is perfectly clear that such fragmentation of single languages into several different languages has happened countless times before. About 2500 years ago, Latin was an obscure little language spoken only in and around the small city of Rome. But the Romans proved to be ambitious, skilled in diplomacy, and powerful in war, and within a few centuries they had carved out an empire consisting of the entire area around the Mediterranean plus much of western Europe and the Balkans. Throughout the Roman Empire Latin was the language of administration, and in time it came to displace some dozens of earlier languages, as the subjects of the Empire gave up their own languages in favour of the more prestigious Latin. Hence Latin became the first language of several million people in southern and western Europe and in the Balkans.

Naturally, like any spoken language, Latin continued to change, but for a while the authority of Rome helped to maintain a degree of uniformity in the speech of vast areas, in spite of the changes which were taking place. The consonant [h] was lost everywhere, and so was word-final [m]. The vowel system was dramatically reorganized, as the five long and five short vowels and three diphthongs of earlier Latin were rearranged into a new system of seven vowels without length distinctions and at most one diphthong. Velar plosives came to be strongly palatalized before front vowels. The rich case-system began to collapse and to give way to the increasing use of prepositions, and new verbal inflections replaced some of the old ones. The preferred SOV word order of earlier Latin was replaced by SVO word order. New words were introduced: earlier *equus* 'horse' was replaced by *caballus*, originally a slang term meaning 'nag', and *pulcher* 'beautiful' was replaced by *formosus* (literally 'shapely') or *bellus*. Diminutives became increasingly popular and often replaced the words they were derived from.

By the early centuries of the Christian era spoken Latin was thus already very different from the *classical* language of several centuries earlier, which is the sort of Latin you will learn in school. Such **Vulgar Latin** (the term means only 'popular') was everywhere the first language, though educated people continued to use the more prestigious classical variety for scholarly writing. But popular speech was often recorded in writing as well – for example, in practical 'how-to-do-it' books on farming or cooking and, famously, in the graffiti preserved in the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, entombed in volcanic ash in AD 79. We even have a few prescriptive guides to the writing of proper classical Latin, such as the celebrated *Appendix Probi*:

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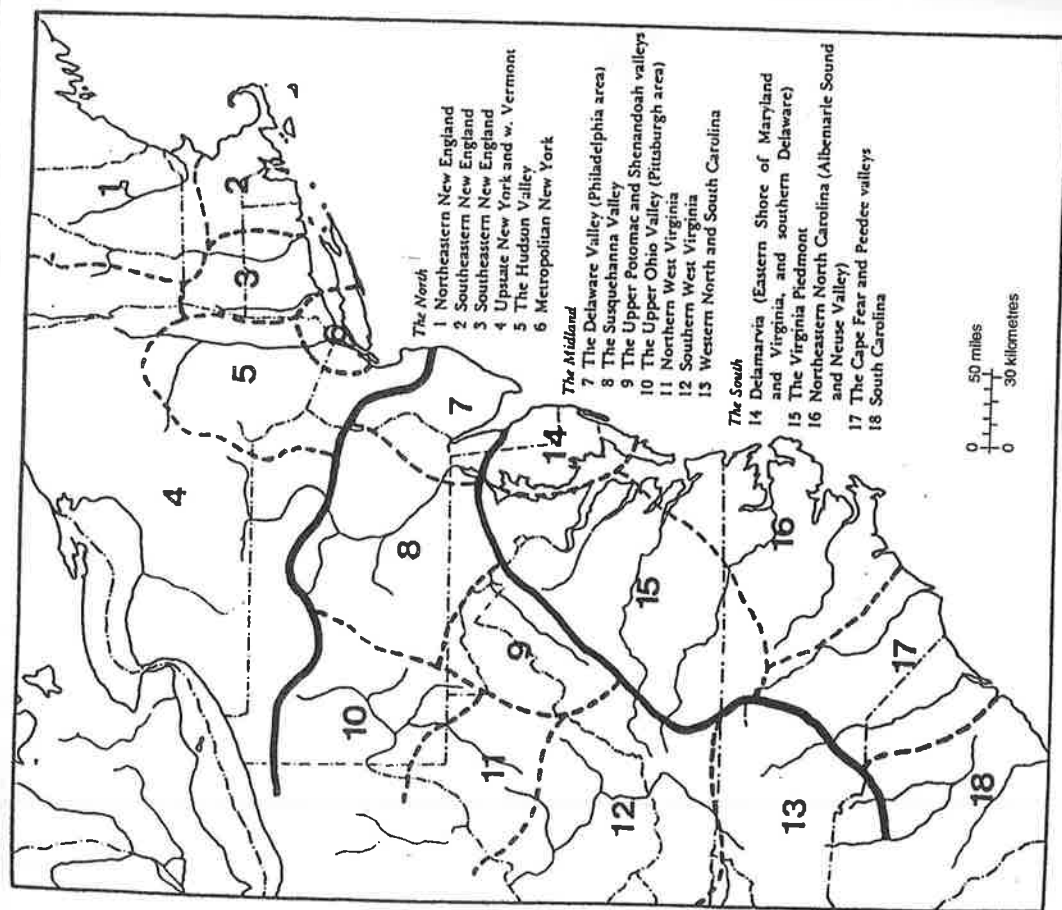


Fig. 7.5 The dialect areas of the eastern USA (Source: Kurath and McDavid 1961: map 2)

vast population movements have so far not allowed the formation of distinctive regional dialects.

7.3 Genetic relationships

So far we have seen that the remorseless processes of language change invariably produce ever-greater differences between the regional varieties