

11 Solving Kurath's puzzle: establishing the antecedents of the American Midland dialect region

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1 Introduction

In the contemporary popular mind the eastern United States is divided into two principal regions, the North and the South.¹ This dichotomy reflects American political history, notably nineteenth-century sectional rivalry that led to a civil war, but it does not necessarily conform to historical or linguistic reality on the ground. It postdates the formative period of American history, when the seaboard North American colonies were settled and migration inland began. In that period a cultural landscape developed that had a three-way territorial differentiation with complex and differing ethnological and social bases: New England (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut), the middle colonies (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware) and the South (Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia). Lexicographer and grammarian Noah Webster noted in his *Grammatical Institute of the English Language* that 'language in the middle States is tinged by a variety of Irish, Scots, and German dialects' (1783: 6). In *Dissertations of the English Language* he cited distinctive linguistic patterns for each of the three regions, writing for instance that 'It is a custom very prevalent in the middle states, even among some well bred people, to pronounce *off*, *soft*, *drop*, *crop*, with the sound of *a*, *aff*, *saff*, *drap*, *crap*. This seems to be a foreign and local dialect . . .' (1789: 110–11).² John Witherspoon, probable coiner of the term *Americanism*, classified 'local phrases and terms' as prevailing in the South (e.g. *tot* 'carry'), the middle colonies, or New England in the seventh of his 1781 series of essays titled *The Druid* (Witherspoon 1931).

¹ Many ideas in this chapter are expanded in Montgomery (2001). The author is indebted to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a Fellowship for University Teachers granted to him in 1991–2, during which much of the material on which the essay is based was gathered. He is also grateful to the staff of the *Dictionary of American Regional English* at the University of Wisconsin at Madison for access to archival materials in the project's office. An earlier version of this paper was given as a keynote address at the Fifth International Conference on the Languages of Scotland and Ulster in 1997.

² By 'foreign and local' Webster apparently meant different from his native New England.

Nineteenth-century literature on American English dealt mainly with differences between British and American English, innovations and archaisms in American English, and similar issues. Systematic consideration of speech regions commenced only in the third decade of the next century, prompted in part by interest in antecedents of regional American English from the British Isles. This research, undertaken most notably by Hans Kurath, was foreshadowed by two small studies that considered the existence and nature of a speech region between New England and the South. From observations of fellow Princeton University students, N. C. Burt in 1878 posited such a region having at its core Pennsylvania and that state's derivative settlement areas to the west and south, and connected the region with emigrants from Ulster:³ 'the dialect of Pennsylvania is mainly Scotch-Irish . . . Their dialect is broadly defined, both against the people of New York and the people of old Virginia on the south and east . . . [there is] general agreement of dialect between the Pennsylvanians and the North-Carolinians' (1878: 413). Surveying a single feature of pronunciation (*/s/* vs. */z/* in *greasy* and the verb *grease*), University of Michigan professor George Hempl in 1896 distinguished a middle region from a northern one, placing the boundary across central Pennsylvania. He said nothing about possible British sources of the region's speech, but in calling the region the 'Midland' Hempl introduced that term to American dialectology.

The larger picture of American speech in the Atlantic states began to gain focus a generation later. In 1928 Kurath, newly appointed director of the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada project, summarised scholarship on American regional pronunciation to date, outlined what he expected his atlas survey to find,⁴ and made tentative links between regions of the US and the British Isles:

Like the seaboard of New England, the tide-water region of Virginia received most of its early population from the Southeastern England, and therefore has Southern English speech habits. But the Piedmont of Virginia and the Carolinas, and the Great Valley, were largely settled, during the half-century preceding the Revolution, by the Scotch-Irish, who spoke a quite different dialect, namely, the English of the Lowlands of Scotland or the North of England as modified by the Southern English Standard. They neither dropped their *r*'s nor did they pronounce their long mid-vowels diphthongal fashion. The large German element from Pennsylvania ultimately acquired this type of English. (Kurath 1928: 391f.)

In this passage we find the thinking that led Kurath to his version of the Midland speech region, which began in the Delaware Valley and broadened sharply as it extended westward across Pennsylvania into the Ohio Valley and beyond and

³ In this chapter 'Ulster' refers to the historic, nine-county province rather than to present-day, six-county Northern Ireland.

⁴ The project anticipated interviewing mainly older Americans native to their communities and aimed to compare their language habits from one part of the country to another.

also south-westward into the western half of Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas and beyond. The region thus encompassed the lower Midwest, Appalachia and the upper South, and had two subdivisions, the North Midland and the South Midland (1949: 27–37). Kurath's formulation has provided a linguistic corollary to cultural phenomena. His commentary suggests uneasiness with views held by George Philip Krapp and others. Krapp stated that 'in America three main types of speech have come to be recognized, a New England local type, a Southern local type, and a general or Western speech covering the rest of the country' that was largely homogeneous (1925, vol. 1: 35). He linked the general variety in the Middle West (which he also called 'General American') to northern England in its intonation: 'it is quite obvious to one familiar with various types of British speech, that the cadences of speech in the north of England are on the whole much closer to those of American speech than are the cadences of the speech of the south of England' (1925, vol. 2: 23). He believed the third American region was a westward extension from New York State.

Krapp's picture of American dialects might seem to resemble Kurath's, but it lacked important elements: (1) a historical basis (prior to Kurath virtually nothing had been said about how settlement and migration patterns might have contributed to major speech regions); (2) a role for Pennsylvania, which Kurath considered critical in the development of American regional English; and (3) a calculation of boundaries between regions by use of empirically gathered data. Krapp had not proposed, for instance, where the Middle West ended and the South began, nor had he attempted to map speech regions.

Whatever informal basis Krapp's division had, Kurath thought it unjustified on historical grounds. Unlike predecessors, he had studied colonial history thoroughly and become convinced of the role of Pennsylvania. He knew Frederick Jackson Turner's 'frontier thesis' on the Old West and had studied the best scholarship on emigration and settlement. He agreed that New England and the South were more or less distinct, but although the large, intermediate region had such commonalities in pronunciation as full articulation of postvocalic *r*, he found it difficult in the days before the atlas survey, which commenced in 1931, to generalise about the speech of this territory as he considered it and its history.

In his 1928 essay Kurath did not employ the term *Midland*, and he was not to do so for another twenty years, but he conceived such a region in a form that was to become common currency in American linguistics. He presented the first linguistic map of the region in his *Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (1949), a volume that remains the most comprehensive, accessible work on traditional vocabulary of the Atlantic states. In its opening chapter he wrote:

This far-flung Midland area, settled largely by Pennsylvanians and by their descendants in the Southern uplands, constitutes a separate speech area which is distinct from the Northern area – the New England settlement area – and from the Southern area. Its northern boundaries run in a

westwardly direction through the northern counties of Pennsylvania, its southern boundary in a southwestwardly direction through the Blue Ridge and through the Carolina piedmont. The South Midland, to be sure, exhibits a considerable infusion of Southern vocabulary and pronunciations . . . After 1720 large flocks of Ulster Scots and Palatine Germans arrived on Delaware Bay and spread out into the back country of Philadelphia and then westward to the Alleghenies and the Ohio Valley, and then southward through western Maryland and Virginia to the Carolinas . . . The influence of the English-speaking Ulster Scots upon the speech of certain sections of Pennsylvania and of the southern upland cannot be doubted, but it is surprisingly intangible. The Dutch and the Germans, who spoke their own language for many generations and passed through a stage of bilingualism before they gave up their native language, have left a much more tangible impress upon the English of their areas of concentration. (1949: 3f.)

This passage and Kurath's accompanying map (1949: figure 3) give the impression of precision and lead the reader to assume that, like others based on linguistic atlas work, they reflect the bundling of isoglosses for specific items. To be sure, Kurath later in the volume identified seventeen terms having predominantly Midland distribution (1949: 28), but these were fewer than the ones setting off the North or the South and less consistent in their distribution as well. His evidence was unusual, in that some items were shared by the North and Midland but not found in the South, with others shared by the Midland and South as opposed to the North. Such items helped Kurath sketch the Midland's boundaries but meant the region was defined partially by default and lacked the internal coherence of the North and the South. He also outlined two subregions, the North Midland and the South Midland, each of which shared many items with the North or the South, respectively, rather than with the other half of the Midland. Thus, Kurath's Midland was based on negative as well as positive evidence; it was where the South stopped being the South in some cases and the North stopped being the North in others.

Further, Kurath did not cite sources on Ulster speech to support his expectation that the Midland region was based in large part on the input of the Ulster Scots/Scotch-Irish. It is true that he labelled *till* 'to' as 'Ulster Scot' (1949: 32) and *hap* 'quilt' as 'Scotch-Irish' (1949: 61), but he identified no scholarly work (such as the *English Dialect Dictionary*) on which he based these judgements.⁵ Kurath's objectivity as a scientist compelled him to state no more than what the evidence permitted, but he refused to abandon his conviction while finding the Ulster Scots element 'surprisingly intangible' compared to his prediction two decades earlier. In short, although it followed nearly twenty years of atlas data collection, Kurath's version of a speech region in the mid Atlantic remained more

⁵ Somewhat more often Kurath cited what he presumed to be the German source for terms, apparently based on first-hand knowledge of that language.

a deduction from settlement history, reflecting what he still expected to find, than an induction from the preponderance of evidence. The seeming contradiction that the linguistic contribution of certain settlement groups 'cannot be doubted', even though it remained elusive after completion of large-scale fieldwork from New England to North Carolina, is what I call 'Kurath's puzzle', a problem in American dialectology that remained unresolved for half a century.

Kurath's seventeen predominantly Midland items are as follows:

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| (1) <i>bawl</i> (of a calf) | (10) <i>skillet</i> 'frying pan' |
| (2) <i>blinds</i> 'window shades' | (11) <i>snake feeder</i> 'dragonfly' |
| (3) <i>green beans</i> | (12) <i>sook</i> 'call to cows' |
| (4) <i>hull</i> 'to shell' | (13) <i>spouting/spouts</i> |
| (5) <i>lamp oil</i> 'kerosene' | (14) <i>sugar tree</i> 'sugar maple' |
| (6) <i>lead horse</i> | (15) <i>quarter till</i> |
| (7) <i>(arm) load</i> | (16) <i>want off</i> |
| (8) <i>(little) piece</i> 'short distance' | (17) <i>you'ns</i> |
| (9) <i>poke</i> 'paper bag' | |

We can only speculate why Kurath cited evidence for the transatlantic ancestry of virtually none of the terms discussed or mapped in his *Word Geography*, including those above. Why did he apparently not seek support for the Ulster background of his Midland items? In hindsight we know that he had few resources for investigating his own hypothesis half a century ago. Perhaps he realised this, but he gives no indication of it in his writings. Today, following the publication of regional dictionaries and other works, we are much better equipped to explore the question. No term in the list is of unambiguous German ancestry. *Hull* and *want off* have a plausible German source or were probably reinforced by a German form, and *snake feeder* 'dragonfly' may be a loan translation from the language. Six items are traceable at least in part to Ulster (*hull*, *piece*, *poke*, *quarter till*, *want off*, *you'ns*),⁶ some of which can be identified thanks only to such recent publications as the *Concise Ulster Dictionary* (Macafee 1996).⁷ Midland terms such as *sugar tree* and *green beans* are clearly American innovations. Kurath's atlas surveyed mainly older, rural, nonmobile speakers in American communities settled since the late eighteenth century, but we can appreciate his challenges in formulating a construct that connected twentieth-century linguistic data, even of a conservative kind, with historical information two centuries older. Since linguistic forms undergo attrition and replacement even in traditional, rural communities, the German and Ulster linguistic bases for the Midland were likely more discernible a hundred years earlier. Such historical factors contributed to Kurath's puzzle.

Kurath's Midland has had an unusual history. Despite a tentative basis that made it more a hypothesis than an established fact, the existence of a large speech region with northern and southern subdivisions became received wisdom

⁶ Adams (2000) shows in detail how German and Ulster sources for *want* + preposition merged.

⁷ Some of these are identified in Crozier (1984), who deals principally with Scotch-Irish lexical contributions attested in Pennsylvania.

in American linguistics, as Kurath's students espoused the Midland more zealously than their mentor. To be sure, Kurath's position has found considerable support in the work of cultural geographers and folklorists mapping American material culture.⁸ Kurath's map of three principal American dialects appeared in numerous works on American English and was employed by such prestigious dictionaries as *Webster's Third International* and the *Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE)* to identify the regional dimensions of many terms.

Because Kurath's evidence was limited and almost entirely of a lexical nature, however, the Midland region was inevitably challenged, first by Charles-James Bailey, who called it 'an unsubstantiable artifact of word geography' (1968:1). While 'not questioning the existence of a subdialect corresponding to what has been called the 'South Midland' dialect' (*ibid.*), he opposed that term in favour of 'Outer Southern', arguing that more phonological evidence grouped it with the Lower (or 'Inner') South than with the North Midland. Commonalities with the Lower South include merger of the lax vowels /ɛ/ and /ɪ/ in *pen/pin*.

More recently scholars have reconsidered Kurath's lexical evidence. Using data collected by *DARE*, Carver (1987) eliminated the Midland altogether, proposing a map of American dialect areas that demarcated the North from the South and divided each into inner and outer halves: 'the broad expanse between the Upper North and the Lower South – Kurath's "Midland" – is not a true unified dialect region, and although a small set of features, the Midland *layer*, characterizes the area as a whole, Kurath's "Midland" is split by the North-South linguistic divide into two dialect regions, the Upper South and the Lower North' (1987: 161). Davis and Houck examined twelve lexical and four phonological variables from the linguistic atlas and concluded that 'data do not support the positing of a separate and distinct Midland dialect area; in fact . . . a large section of the eastern United States can be better understood as a linear transition area between two major dialects – Northern and Southern – than as a separate Midland' (1992: 61f.). Their approach to the issue was quite different from Kurath's, in that they chose a small number of features to map (mainly ones with only two alternatives, such as *redbug* vs. *chigger*) and then examined their distribution to see if their boundaries clustered. Kurath had mapped several hundred items, ignored those that revealed no clear regional pattern, and grouped items whose distribution was similar. Johnson (1994) argued that, if Davis and Houck had begun with different items or had considered more evidence for the ones they analysed, they would on the contrary have found support for Kurath's Midland.

2 The solution

Accumulation of a different kind of research over the past decade points toward a solution to Kurath's puzzle that substantiates his original view that the Midland had a decisive input from eighteenth-century Ulster emigrants (Montgomery

⁸ The Mid-Atlantic and Upland South regions outlined by Glassie (1968) correspond closely to Kurath's North Midland and South Midland.

1989, 1997, etc.). This research finds that earlier scholarship, including that of Carver and of Kurath himself, considered largely inappropriate evidence: rather than pronunciation or vocabulary, grammatical features brought from Ulster turn out to be crucial. This proposal involves pronouns, word-order patterns, suffixes, and such function words as prepositions, adverbs and conjunctions. Little data for these is available from linguistic atlas surveys, American or British, and not much more from dictionaries of any kind until recently. Linguistic atlas methodology, designed mainly to elicit single-word responses, often did not or could not permit the collection of grammatical material without suggesting an answer to a respondent.

The simple distinction between vocabulary and grammar has important implications for issues in historical linguistics such as reconstructing transatlantic connections. Vocabulary is less stable between and within generations and can change, disappear, or spread more rapidly. Grammar is 'deeper', normally more resistant to change, at least rapid change, and is usually based on rules unconsciously acquired. Scholars of African American English and anglophone creoles realised a generation ago that grammar provides a more valid basis for positing genetic relationships between varieties than vocabulary, but only lately has the distinction come to scholars tracing regional American English to the British Isles. Systematic application of it indicates that Ulster-Scots/Scotch-Irish input is one of the most important Old World influences on the development of American regional dialects.⁹

Before presenting the evidence that resolves Kurath's puzzle, let me identify in more detail the emigrants from Ireland whose speech Kurath expected to have a definitive role in the Midland region. 'Scotch-Irish' is the traditional American designation for these people, at least 150,000 of whom left Ulster, the northern province of Ireland, between 1717 and 1775 (Dickson 1966, *inter alia*). Surname research indicates that Americans of Ulster extraction formed one-sixth of the European-derived population in the first US census of 1790, including half of the white population of South Carolina and Georgia (Doyle 1981: 72–6). Most Scotch-Irish were of Lowland Scottish ancestry and tradition, having forebears who crossed the Irish Channel following King James I's Ulster Plantation of the early 1600s and settled in four counties along Ireland's north-eastern coast (Perceval-Maxwell 1973). After leaving Ulster for North America in the next century, the Scotch-Irish landed overwhelmingly in the Delaware Valley and moved westward (Leyburn 1962). They and their descendants became the dominant group in much of the colonial hinterland (or back country), populating the inland parts of Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia, and positioning their descendants at the headwaters of the Ohio River and in the Carolina Piedmont, from which the lower Midwest and much of the interior South were settled in the early nineteenth century. Contrary to widespread belief, most Ulster emigrants did not settle in the Appalachian mountains, but their children and

⁹ Many terms responsible for the distinctiveness of dialect regions were innovations.

grandchildren often did, after considerable contact with groups having other linguistic heritage.

The Scotch-Irish were a people of paradox who left far less documentation about themselves than many much smaller groups of emigrants to North America (Montgomery 2000b). Their imprint is undeniable on music, dance, folk architecture, folklore, and other areas of expressive and material culture, but historians, linguists and other scholars have found it more elusive than demonstrable, leading many to conclude that their chief characteristic was their adaptability. One historian's well-known statement that 'after the Revolution, the Scotch-Irish were no longer a separate national stock but were Americans' (Leyburn 1962: vi) would seem a basis for understanding the loss of distinctive linguistic and cultural traits of these people.

Kurath's anticipation of a significant Ulster element in American English was not shared by other scholars. Many of those studying the English of the colonial period have emphasised not the retention of forms from the British Isles, but the levelling effects of dialect contact in North America that took place to such an extent that remnants of British dialects disappeared as an American koiné arose (Read 1933; Dillard 1992).¹⁰ Even so, McDavid's warning about dialect levelling is worth remembering: 'in every community the English-speaking settlers were of mixed origin . . . It is best to assume dialect mixture from the beginning in each colony, in every colony, with different results' (1985: 19f.). New sources of evidence enable us not only to identify the Ulster component in the Midland much better, but also to test hypotheses about the koinéisation of colonial American English (Montgomery 1996). Sources include extensive colonial-era manuscripts such as letters from emigrants and other semi-literate writers (Montgomery 1995), structured elicitations of present-day speech to explore grammatical constraints, observations of rural, conservative speech in the British Isles, and new lexicographical resources (Macafee 1996 and Fenton 1995/2000 in Ulster, *DARE* and its archives in the US, and *LAMSAS* field interviews unexamined by Kurath). These permit the assembling of evidence to fill earlier gaps and to determine that many grammatical features were contributed to American speech by Ulster emigrants and their descendants (detailed accounts of many features are published elsewhere, especially in Montgomery 1989 and 1997).

3 Scotch-Irish grammatical features

The following features can be documented in Ulster and the American Midland. Most are traceable beyond Ulster ultimately to Lowland Scotland (positive *any-more* is an apparent exception), but otherwise they have not been prevalent in the British Isles.¹¹ In the United States some are found in the Lower South, where

¹⁰ See Montgomery (2001) for discussion and critique of these ideas.

¹¹ Several of these are documented in England north of the River Humber, but historically this area was close to Scotland in culture and language.

many descendants of Ulster emigrants later settled. This compilation identifies principal sources supporting their Ulster and American Midland classification.¹² In terms of their transatlantic relations, the features may be classified into three groups. The first seven are structurally and functionally identical today in Ulster and the American Midland. They have been retained intact and remain current on both sides of the Atlantic.

- (1) combination of *all* with interrogative pronouns (*CUD*; *DSME*), as in *Who all is coming?*, *What all did he say?*
- (2) *need* + past participle (*CSD*; *USG*; *DARE* 'chiefly Midland, esp Pennsylvania'; *DSME*), as in *That thing needs washed.*
- (3) *wait on* 'wait for' (*DARE* 'South, Midland'; *DSME*), as in *I was supposed to wait on this fellow at the forks of the creek.*
- (4) *want* + preposition (i.e. with ellipsis of infinitive *to be/to get*) (*CSD*; *CUD*; *DARE*;¹³ *DSME*), as in *Does he want out?*, *That dog doesn't know whether he wants in or out.*
- (5) *till* 'to' (to express time before the hour) (*CSD*; *CUD*; *DARE*;¹⁴ *DSME*), as in *He said he'd be here about quarter till eight.*
- (6) *whenever* 'at the time that' (especially for a single event in the past), 'as soon as' (*CUD*; *DARE*; *DSME*), as in *Whenever I heard about it, I signed up right away; He wasn't born whenever we moved off.*¹⁵
- (7) *all the* (+ singular count noun or *one*) 'the only' (*CUD*; *HT*; *DARE* 'chiefly South, Midland'; *DSME*), as in *He's all the son she has, Is this all the one you have?*

Other features have changed in one way or another. An eighth one, *-s* to mark verbal concord, has eroded since colonial days. In both Scotland and Ulster the suffix *-s* was used on any present-tense verb not having an adjacent, personal-pronoun subject (Murray 1873; Montgomery 1994). In other words, the suffix followed two constraints, involving the type of subject (it appeared on verbs whose third-plural subject was a noun) and the proximity of the subject (it appeared on verbs whose first- or second-person subject was separated from the verb, especially by a clause). These constraints are illustrated in examples from eighteenth-century letters written by Ulster emigrants to North America.¹⁶

¹² The following sources are referenced: *Concise Scots Dictionary* (*CSD*; Robinson et al. 1985); *Concise Ulster Dictionary* (*CUD*; Macafee 1996); *The Hamely Tongue* (*HT*; Fenton 1995/2000); *Ulster Scots: a Grammar of the Traditional Written and Spoken Language* (*USG*; Robinson 1997); *Dictionary of American Regional English* (*DARE*; Cassidy et al. 1985-); and *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English* (*DSME*; Montgomery and Hall 2004). Many other sources providing positive and negative evidence for these features, including informal elicitations of native speakers, are not identified here.

¹³ The 33 examples of *want* + preposition in the *DARE* archive show an overwhelming concentration in the larger Midland region.

¹⁴ The *DARE* archive has 8 examples of *till*, which collectively have a Midland distribution.

¹⁵ For an analysis of the functions of *whenever*, see Montgomery and Kirk (2001).

¹⁶ These examples are taken from letters deposited in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in Belfast. For further information, see Montgomery (1995).

these things *does* not discourage me to go
 . . . to the great God whos mercies never *fails*
 I have no more to write a present but *desires* you to . . .
 We are favoured with a tollerable degree of both and *hopes* . . .

The subject-type constraint remains vigorous in Midland speech, but the proximity constraint did not survive into the twentieth century, though it is evidenced in the letters of Civil War soldiers from the 1860s (Montgomery 1999).

Four other features have either grammaticalised or expanded structurally since crossing the Atlantic. The pronoun *you'uns* 'you' (plural) (*HT*; *DARE*;¹⁷ *DSME*), as in *you'uns make yourselves at home*, was found by Kurath 'in the folk speech in Pennsylvania west of the Susquehanna, in large parts of West Virginia, and in the westernmost parts of Virginia and North Carolina' (1949: 67). This form is attested in Scots (*SND*, s.v. *ane1/yin* III 2), but apparently as a phrase (with *yin* encliticised to various pronouns), not as a pronoun. In Ulster speech today *yous* (and in Ulster Scots the hybrid *yuz yins*, according to Fenton 2000: 240, s.v. *yin*) are employed as second-person-plural-pronouns. The tendency to attach 'un and 'n to pronouns, adjectives (as *big'un*) and nouns remains productive on both sides of the Atlantic today. This process was brought by Ulster emigrants, and it is probable that pronominal *you'uns* arose in North America.

All the far 'as far as', attested in Ulster, has in North America developed comparative and superlative forms *all the farther* and *all the farthest*, both 'as far as' (Thomas 1993).

Combinations of modal auxiliary verbs (*might could*, *might would*, etc.) (*CUD*; *HT*; *DARE* 'chiefly South, South Midland'; *DSME*; Atwood 1953: 35), as in *You might could ask somebody about it, I might can go with you tomorrow*, are well documented from Scotland (Miller and Brown 1982) and the United States (Mishoe and Montgomery 1994). But Scottish and American combinations differ in several regards (e.g. *will can*, the most common one in Scotland and Ulster, is unknown in the US). Montgomery and Nagle (1994) survey the evidence for a transatlantic connection and argue that the American system of combining modal auxiliaries is derived from Lowland Scotland through Ulster, but their evidence from Ulster was not strong, consisting of examples suggested to informants. In 1997 Montgomery collected in Northern Ireland what is apparently the only spontaneous example there on record of *might could*, the only combination widely known in both Scotland and the US, from a speaker in north County Antrim:

I might could do something for her, but you maybe should take her home.

Though eighteenth-century attestations of modal combinations are lacking, the avenue of transatlantic transmission now seems clear.

A twelfth feature is the use of *anymore* 'nowadays' in a positive sentence (*DARE*; *DSME*; Ash 2000), as in *Politics moves so fast and in such mysterious ways anymore*,

¹⁷ *DARE* has not published the letter Y, but its archive has 37 citations for *you'uns*. These come almost entirely from the Midland.

or *We called it hog all the time. Anymore they call it pork*. James Milroy (1981: 3) calls this 'perhaps the most striking connection between Ulster and the United States', but he was able to find examples only from parts of Donegal that had recently been Irish-speaking, a peripheral area for early migration to North America. *Anymore* is cited in positive sentences in the *English Dialect Dictionary* and the *Scottish National Dictionary*, but only with the future-time sense 'from now on'. American English uses the construction only for the present time. In 1995 the author observed a sentence with positive *anymore* in county Antrim:

The Orange marches have become increasingly working class. If they have money, middle-class people go on holiday for the Twelfth *anymore*.

It is not at all clear that more than the germ of this usage (which almost certainly has its ultimate sources in Gaelic) was brought by Ulster emigrants, but as for many of the other features cited, recent research has established a more plausible link between the British Isles and North America.

Of these dozen features, Kurath investigated *you'uns*, *till* and *want* + preposition, finding all three to have the Midland as their core area. Others have been mapped in recent years (e.g. *need* + past participle by Murray et al. 1996; positive *anymore* by Ash 2000). Not unexpectedly, their geography is often complex, as Americans have since colonial days migrated westward, southward and, more recently, northward. For this reason detailing the regional patterns of these features with precision is beyond the scope of the present chapter. Suffice it to say that each is current (although not necessarily frequent or quantifiable) in the territory that Kurath identified as the Midland. Their prevalence contrasts markedly with the rural, often old-fashioned vocabulary items usually employed by the Linguistic Atlas to outline speech regions. The latter were in almost every case rapidly becoming recessive.

4 Persistence of grammatical features

At least five principled explanations suggest themselves for why Ulster grammatical features have persisted in the American Midland:

- (1) That the region overlaps largely with the Appalachian mountains, where communities are more 'isolated' than elsewhere in the eastern US. Though commonly asserted for Appalachia, this characterisation is dubious, if not fallacious, for such a large region (Montgomery 2000a). The grammatical features presented here are not, with one or two exceptions, restricted socially, nor are they confined to less-educated, older, or rural speakers. 'Isolation' therefore cannot explain their survival.
- (2) That settlers of Ulster background predominated in certain places in the formative colonial period (see Mufwene 1996's founder principles; Fischer 1989).

- (3) That grammatical features are harder to root out, involving largely unconscious constraints and rules which are less subject to being monitored by speakers than vocabulary and less likely to erode or diffuse geographically.¹⁸
- (4) That they are stylistically disguised, spoken variants that are confined to informal style or specific pragmatic contexts. Long after speakers become literate, these features may continue in use for specific rhetorical or pragmatic purposes, as for more emphatic or emotional expression (a good example is combinations of modal verbs, which convey politeness and perform other interactional functions; see Mishoe and Montgomery 1994). Thus, when they fall out of general, everyday use or are screened out of writing, they may escape the censure or the notice of the school teacher.
- (5) That they are semantically or structurally disguised. This is perhaps the most crucial explanation of all. Thus, a speaker who states *I'll come whenever I can* may be using the word *whenever* to mean 'as soon as' to communicate urgency, but may be understood by others to say that he would take his time. A colleague of mine who some years ago moved to South Carolina from Michigan reported one day that she had had a sudden leak in her kitchen. When she called the plumber, he responded that he would be over 'whenever he could', but she angrily told him not to bother, believing he would take his time. Using *whenever* 'as soon as' to convey the urgency of the situation, he intended to come at his very next available moment.

Collectively the last three reasons suggest that grammatical features may escape notice or stigmatisation more readily than vocabulary. With the exception of *wait on*, none of those identified here are commonly cited in popular handbooks on 'correct' English usage. Most have little or no social salience and are used as much by middle-class as working-class speakers. In short, much of the Ulster contribution to American English has probably been disguised over the past two centuries and is detectable today only in grammatical features – if one knows where to look. Some features (e.g. plural verbal *-s*) can be found in semi-literate letters from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, others almost entirely in records of twentieth-century speech (e.g. combinations of modal auxiliaries). In the latter case we can state with assurance that they are historically connected to Ulster and Scotland because they are documented there today and virtually nowhere else in the British Isles.

Though supported by many features, this solution to Kurath's puzzle cannot be taken as predictive. We cannot identify at random a grammatical element of eighteenth-century Ulster speech and presume with any certainty where, or whether, it would appear in American English. However, it is predictive in another sense, by offering the working hypothesis that any grammatical feature prevalent

¹⁸ This statement does not dispute that vernacular features of grammar are replaced through formal education, but it argues that this process normally affects an individual's writing and formal speech, not unguarded, spoken usage.

in the Midland but not found in both the North and the South most likely had at least in part an Ulster source.¹⁹

5 Implications

Using grammatical features to solve Kurath's puzzle and reconstruct the Midland dialect region has a number of consequences. It brings a renewed appreciation of the importance of settlement history in the development of American English. In the process it provides an explanation for the differentiation of American regional English that is based on extensive research on input varieties and that makes predictions for the donor source of many regional grammatical forms.

This solution gives insights to eighteenth-century source varieties, the processes of transatlantic plantation of English and Scots, and some ideas about how they both have evolved in the British Isles since colonial days. The solution proposed here by no means indicates simple transfer and retention, and it does not imply that the grammatical features after coming to the Midland region remained static geographically or structurally. Many have spread, especially into the Lower South, been borrowed into other varieties (such as African American English), or evolved further in one way or another.

6 Conclusions

The North vs. South distinction has represented a major dynamic in American English over the past century and a half, probably longer. It remains vigorous today, as competition between Northern and Southern variants (especially for lexis, e.g. *dress* vs. *stuff* for the dish of seasoned cornbread served with turkey) continues in innumerable cases in the United States today. However, the role of the Midland, reflecting a pattern laid down nearly three centuries ago, remains strong and clear, though less intuitive if one does not have a proper historical perspective. *DARE* identifies three hundred items as having Midland distribution and over one thousand having South Midland distribution in its first two volumes encompassing letters A-H (Index 1993: 83–6, 147–9).²⁰ Based largely on their research on vowel patterning, Labov et al. (2002) have also identified a distinct Midland region, albeit a much narrower one lying entirely north of the Ohio River.

Hans Kurath posited the Midland region as having significant Ulster input from what he knew of settlement and migration history, but he did not – and almost certainly could not – demonstrate this with the linguistic evidence available to him. Nevertheless, he maintained belief that the pertinent evidence existed. Research now shows that grammatical rather than lexical features can solve his

¹⁹ For example, the perfective use of *done*, as in *He done overcooked the turkey*, is widespread in both South Midland and Lower Southern varieties of American English. A convincing source has not been identified, but its geographical distribution suggests an Ulster one.

²⁰ Many of these are shared with the Lower South.

puzzle, confirm his original formulation, and restore the Midland to its rightful place in the canon of American regional varieties. What Kurath envisioned we can now see more clearly. Fifty years after the publication of his *Word Geography* his formulation of the Midland region must be recognised as an enduring scholarly idea from one of the twentieth-century's most far-sighted linguists.

Would the Midland region exist today without the Ulster Scots/Scotch-Irish contribution? Yes, *DARE* and Kurath's own *Word Geography* are persuasive on this point, because many Midland terms are American innovations, some attested only in the twentieth century that could hardly have been brought by Ulster emigrants. But the speech of those emigrants was in large part responsible for establishing the nature and contours of the Midland region. This input is, with the possible exception of German, as significant as any European influence on American dialects and is quite likely, along with the African influence on Lower Southern speech, one of the two profoundest ones bringing about the regional differentiation of American English. It is these two settlement streams, from a small province in the north of Ireland and from a vast continent, that have made the greatest difference today.

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