Q&A: Where do accents come from? Linguist explains why we talk the way we talk

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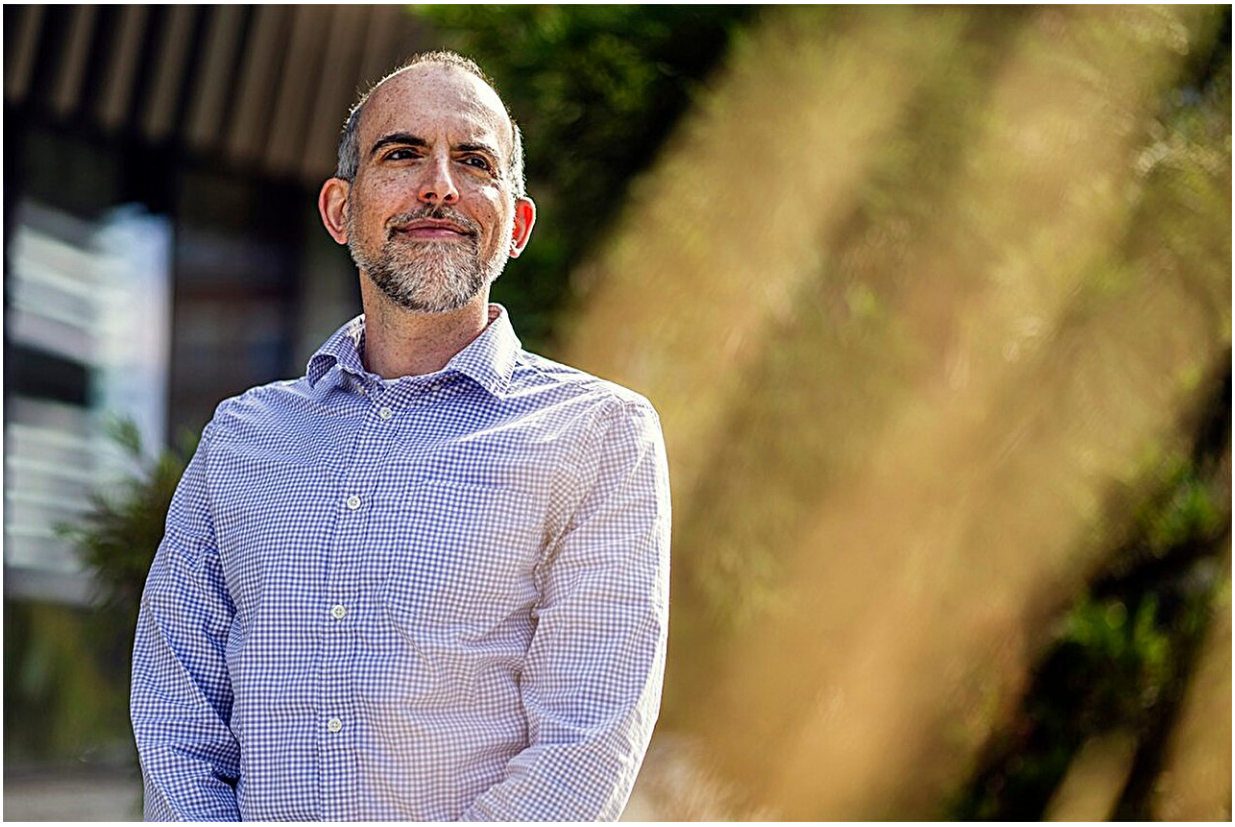

Adam Cooper, Northeastern teaching professor and linguistics director. Photo by Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University. Credit: Northeastern University

When it comes to how we talk, accents are often the thing people focus on first. We love to do impressions, and certain accents even have an

impact on what we buy. But what exactly is an accent, and how does one develop?

For starters, whether you're a Bostonian craving some "chowdah," a Southerner asking for a pin (or is it a pen?) or a Chicagoan looking for a new "jab," everyone has an accent, even if you don't think you have one.

"We all have our own accent, but it's interesting to see the levels of awareness that people have about what qualifies as an accent or not," says Adam Cooper, teaching professor and director of linguistics at Northeastern University.

Why are some accents, like the Georgia drawl, disappearing while others remain unchanged? Why do you and your parents have different accents even if you grew up in the same neighborhood or region?

Northeastern Global News sat down with Cooper to understand the ins and outs of why we talk the way we talk. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Most people are generally able to recognize certain accents, but linguistically speaking, what is an accent?

When we talk about an accent, what we mean is the pronunciation differences or pronunciation patterns associated with a particular dialect of a language.

It's one piece of what we more broadly think of as a dialect. A dialect of a language is a systematic variant of that language that can be conditioned by any number of socially related factors: where one's from, socio-linguistic factors like economic class, cultural background, gender. All these social factors that can affect and play into the ways we define

ourselves and our identities can affect the way that we use language as well.

For any dialect, one piece of it would be how it's actually pronounced. For example, the Southern drawl that was the focus of the study that the Washington Post reported on. Words like "my" or "house," historically by speakers in that part of the country were diphthongized and elongated to "hawse" and "mah."

In terms of other features that don't connect to the pronunciation, Southern English speakers may be more familiar or used to using what we would call double modals: might could. "I might could do that for you," or something like that. That would be another piece of their dialect, but it's not about the pronunciation so much as the sentence structure.

An accent is just one aspect of a broader dialectal pattern which is going to be an array of features that operate at different levels of language structure.

How do accents develop? How can we acquire an accent or lose an accent?

One of the factors that just affects how language operates in general and really reinforces that language doesn't exist in a vacuum is that people move all the time and interact with people from all different parts of the country, all different parts of the world. When you have this opportunity for contact with speakers of different linguistic backgrounds, it can often affect the way we use language, whether we're actively aware of it or not.

What can happen is if speakers with their own background from a

different part of the country move to the South, they start to interact with folks who are already there and they themselves pick up features of the way the language is used, the way the accent is pronounced. But in turn, they may be bringing their own patterns and introducing their own patterns into that melting pot as well.

Just as much as geographic movement can facilitate this change in language, limited communication with speakers of different backgrounds can inhibit that.

Historically those communities near the Appalachian Mountains have been isolated from other parts of the country. Looking at the English that's used in that part of the U.S., you see a lot of features that are what we would call more conservative, in the sense that they maintain characteristics of English as it was spoken hundreds of years ago that have been lost elsewhere.

Why can parents have an accent that their children don't have (or vice versa) even if they've grown up in the same place?

That language changes is a fact of life. Even in one geographic area, one particular location, you can see that the space might be constant from one generation to the next, but the makeup of the people that people are interacting with from one generation to the next can be different. Speakers growing up in one area decades ago in their formative years when they were developing their primary idiolect, their own personal language system, may have been interacting with a different cohort of people other than what younger generations in the same area might have been encountering. In the course of those decades you can see a different distribution as far as diversity of people moving into the area.

There's no such thing as perfectly maintaining a language from one generation to the next because everyone is having their own personal experiences engaging with language and the world around them and with other speakers. We're all shaped by our own unique circumstances.

Is there a particular accent, for any reason, that is particularly interesting to you?

One of the things that I enjoy studying is something like the Southern drawl in Southern English or what we also have in the northern cities vowel shift where instead of pronunciations like "bag," you get "byag," characteristic of cities like Buffalo and Chicago. What I really enjoy studying about these and what I try to impart to my students as well is that these are all systematic variations. They're not just random departures from what we think of as "correct English," but they can all be analyzed systematically with the same degree of rigor that we can analyze any kind of language.

What we try to impart is that, at the end of the day, there's no right or wrong way. Everyone has an accent. We may have a sense of what a "general American accent" is, but by no means is that taken to be the right way that a language like English is used. We all have our own accent, but it's interesting to see the levels of awareness that people have about what qualifies as an accent or not.

We all have these different dialects and accents and they're all valid forms of expression.

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