American Dialects
Why are dialects the butt of humor?
What do comic treatments of dialect tell us about cultural stereotypes?

What do they tell us about linguistic power?
The politics of dialect, and the social consequences of dialect competition:

- everyone speaks a dialect
- even Standard American English is a dialect
- nondialectal English is a myth
- Midwest English = unmarked or standard English? Also a myth.
- Like the myth that somewhere in Appalachia there are people who speak the language of Shakespeare, pure and unadulterated.
We all control multiple dialects,

code switching from one variety to another

but code switching is hierarchical: speakers of prestige varieties—sometimes called acrolects—don’t typically feel the need to switch “down” to stigmatized varieties, or basilects

instead, speakers of the “basilect” or low-status variety often feel pressure to switch up

switching down may be seen as offensive and demeaning

   the example of Wiggas appropriating black speech
Wiggas on “The Wire”
Selective mainstream borrowing from African American English, or AAE:

\[ da \text{ man} \]
\[ we \text{ be doin’ this} \]

without reflecting how such forms are actually used in AAE

but AAE also spreads to non-African Americans, especially in urban settings
The linguistic position that all dialects/varieties are equal is one that challenges long-held beliefs that the standard variety is

- more logical,
- more expressive,
- more aesthetically pleasing,
- more precise,
- more flexible,
- and morally superior.
Do English teachers sound different from everybody else?

Is there an English major dialect?
Anecdote: a speaker taught to say [krik] rather than [krık] for creek, but pronouncing roof with the same vowel as foot was acceptable, even though both derive from the same dialect.

[krík] was stigmatized; [ruf] was not.

what about the status of [fiʃ] for [fiʃ] as variants of the word fish?
r-lessness: a marker of lower class speech in New York City, but upper class speech in the United Kingdom and the American South.

Labov’s experiment with r-lessness in New York City department store clerks

researchers selected three stores, Saks Fifth Avenue, Macy’s (in Herald Square), and Klein’s (in Union Square).

the clerks at all three stores were all working class, but they adapted their pronunciation of r to the (perceived) status of the store’s customers

researchers found more r’s in clerks’ responses at Saks than at Macy’s, because Saks attracted a more upscale clientele

more r’s at Macy’s than Klein’s, because Klein’s was for working-class shoppers (remember, the clerks were working class as well).
The emergence of regional dialects:

- retention of older features (the Appalachia myth)
- naturally-occurring linguistic shift may happen in one place, but not somewhere else (*woodpecker / peckerwood*)
- contact: features rub off when we connect with speakers from other groups (this may be unidirectional, but it’s often bidirectional)
- coining: intentional innovation (new words, speech styles, pronunciations)

natural geographic features such as lakes, rivers, and mountains serve as boundaries that keep speakers together, separating them from other groups

social boundaries also separate speakers

- some are imposed externally: segregation, the formation of ghettos through legal or economic pressures
- some are imposed by the group itself: the intentional self-isolation of Old Order Amish or ultra-orthodox Chasidic Jews.
Regional food terms:

*linguica*, a Portuguese sausage, New England
*bialy*, a roll (Yiddish; New York)
*beignet*, a fritter (New Orleans); also, *po’ boy*, *mouffalaletta*
*pho*, Vietnamese noodle soup
*lutefisk*, Norwegian lye-cured fish, Minnesota
*cheesesteak*
*poutine*

what about terms for a sandwich on a long, soft roll?

*hero*
*hoagie*
*wedge*
*grinder* (usu. toasted; as is a *cosmo*)
*submarine* (*sub*)
*banh mi* (Vietnamese)
Examples of borrowing:

18th century American English borrows from Native American languages

*possum, woodchuck, tomahawk, raccoon*

from Spanish (in the Southwest):

*lariat, rodeo, ranch(o), canyon, arroyo*

from Dutch (in New York City):

*stoop* ‘steps in front of a house’
*cookie*
*to play hooky* ‘skip school’

American English also repurposed British terms to fit new flora, fauna, and geography:

*robin, a different species in the US*
*bluff*, from an adj. that originally meant a broad, flattened shape
from other ‘contact’ languages:

Hawaiian: *aloha, pau, haole, ukulele, pakalolo*

coining: *tumbleweed, babycake*