

THE DIALECTS OF NEW ENGLAND AND THEIR HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT ON
THE BACKDROP OF THE BRITISH INFLUENCE

(Dialekty Nové Anglie a jejich historický vývoj na pozadí britského vlivu)

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1. Introduction

New England has been traditionally defined as an area in the northeast of the US, comprising six states; Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut (Figure 1). Their grouping together is based on the long, shared history formed by the strong influence of the British Puritan settlers, a fact reflected in the name of New England as well. Today's New England is home to over 15 million Americans (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2020) and represents a unique relic of the oldest part of US history, simultaneously combining rural areas and modern centers of higher education and finance. The colonial foundations reflecting on the modernity of current days have long been appealing to not only historians but also dialectologists, with New England being well-known for its dialects. This paper will introduce the area and its dialects and examine their roots and developments in relation to the strong British linguistic influence that still permeates the region by compiling and comparing academic works from the last century. To fully understand the dialects of New England, it is, however, first necessary to appropriately divide the area on the basis of dialect isoglosses.



Figure 1: The six states of New England (Britannica, n.d.)

2. Geographical and historical delineation of isoglosses in New England (The Kurath's and Carver's Lines)

Hans Kurath, the first linguist to take a deeper interest in the linguistic diversity of the area, was also the first to divide the region on the basis of dialect isoglosses. As a result of his research, the so-called “Kurath's Line” was drawn in 1939, starting at the mouth of the Connecticut River, moving up north through Connecticut and Massachusetts, reaching the border of the Franklin County, and then turning west to the Berkshires where it joins the crest of the Green Mountains, finishing at the northern border of Vermont (Kurath, 1939, p. 8). As seen in

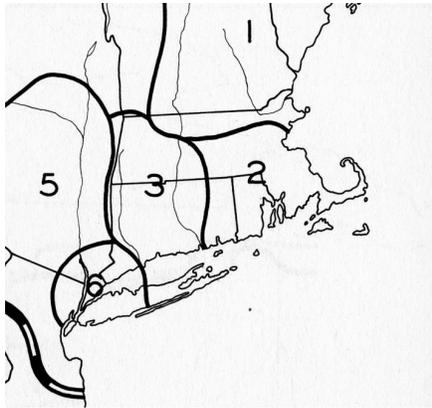


Figure 2: Kurath's line (Boberg, 2001, p. 13)

Figure 2, this line effectively divided New England into three subareas – Northeastern New England (1), Southeastern New England (2), and Southwestern New England (3), completely excluding western Vermont. The distinction between the west and east (i.e., between areas (3) and (1) + (2)) was based on the presence of rhoticity in the west, while the east was overwhelmingly non-rhotic. The isogloss between areas (1) and (2) was motivated predominantly by the presence (or absence) of different vocalic mergers in Rhode Island

(Boberg, 2001, p. 13).

For almost fifty years, Kurath's delineation served as the primary source for all follow-up analyses of the area. Yet, in 1987, Craig M. Carver re-examined the dialects and vocabulary of New England and subsequently created a new geographical division. In it, he roughly retained the position of the Kurath's Line, but redrafted the rest of the map, shifting the line between Northeastern and Southeastern New England, re-including western Vermont. The final product was a map divided into four areas; Northeastern New England (NENE), Southeastern New England (SENE) (sometimes referred to as the Narragansett Bay Area), Southwestern New England (SWNE), and Northwestern New England (NWNE), as seen in Figure 3 (Stanford et al., 2012, p. 129). As this distinction is still widely used today, the following analysis of the main traits of the dialects will be structured on this delineation as well.

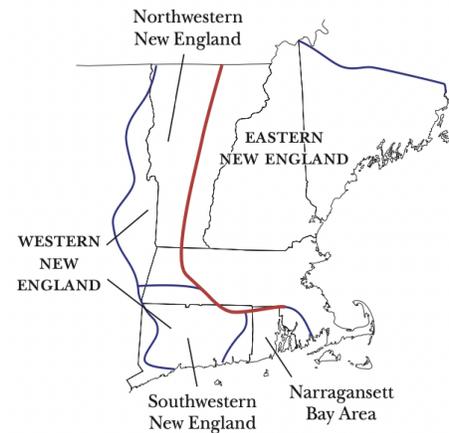


Figure 3: Carver's Line ("Eastern NE" is, in this map, interchangeable with NENE) (Stanford et al., 2012, p. 129)

3. General characteristics of NE dialects in present times

The following section of the paper presents an overview of the most frequently observed dialect features in the four abovementioned subregions, based on a number of compiled academic and phonological sources.

3.1 Dialects in Northeastern New England (NENE)

Based on the Carver's Line, this region comprises the eastern part of Massachusetts, the entirety of New Hampshire and Maine, and the eastern portion of Vermont.

The NENE area is strongly defined by:

- Non-rhoticity, intrusive, and linking R – Representing the best-known feature of the region, Northeastern New Englanders omit their Rs in the postvocalic position, best exemplified by the Boston shibboleth “Pahk the car in Hahvud Yahd,” phonetically [p^hak ðə 'k^haɪ̯ ɪn 'havəd 'jad]. Linking R can also be identified ([“'k^haɪ̯ ɪn”]), along with the intrusive R, used in expressions such as “idear” instead of “idea” (Wolfram & Schilling, 1998, p. 43).
- Caught/Cot merger – The northeast of New England is known for its low back merger, resulting in the universal use of [ɒ] in words such as “cot,” “caught,” “lot,” or “thought.” Hence, both “caught” and “cot” are pronounced as [k^hɒt] (Stanford, 2019, p. 277).
- The lack of horse/hoarse merger – The NENE region, as one of the few in the US, still resists the merging of these vowels, retaining /ɔ/ for “horse,” and the diphthong /oə/ for “hoarse” (Roberts et al., 2006, p. 60)
- The lack of father/bother merger – NENE staunchly resists merging the vowels in the father-bother pair, another rare exception in the United States. Typically, the vowel [a] or [ä] is used in “father,” while [ɒ] or [ɑ] is used in “bother” (Labov et al., 2006, p. 171).
- The lack of Mary/marry/merry merger – Some speakers seem to still differentiate between these, though a general shift to merging is underway (Stanford, 2019, p. 275).
- Full Canadian Raising – Due to its northern geographical location, it is perhaps not surprising that Canadian raising may be observed in the speech of the locals. This phenomenon is marked by the raising of the tongue while producing the first segment of the [aɪ] and [aʊ] diphthongs before voiceless consonants. In NENE, this results in the emergence of the diphthongs [ɪɪ] or [ʌɪ] for [aɪ], and [əʊ] or [ʌʊ] for [aʊ] (Boberg, 2010, p. 156).
- Fronting of the palm/start vowel – The vowel here tends to be highly fronted, resulting in the pronunciation of “car” as [k^ha:] (Labov et al., 2006, p. 111).
- Occurrence of the “broad a” – An obvious legacy of British English, the broadening of vowels in words such as “half” and “pass” can be observed in some older speakers (Stanford, 2019, p. 277).

- Specific lexical items – NENE speakers produce examples such as “frappe” (milkshake), “hoodsie” (small cone of ice cream), or “packie” (liquor store) (Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 67).

3.2 Dialects in Southeastern New England (SENE)

This area, the smallest of the four mentioned, consists of Rhode Island and the western part of Massachusetts’ Bristol County.

The SENE area is strongly defined by:

- Non-rhoticity – Similarly to NENE, SENE uses non-rhotic forms (Labov et al., 2006, p. 227).
- Absence of the cot/caught merger – Unlike its northern neighbor, SENE is known for using [ɑ] in “cot,” and the diphthong [oə], in “caught,” not merging the pair (Roberts et al., 2006, p. 60).
- Complete horse/hoarse merger – While a Bostonian would most likely differentiate between these words, a Providence local would produce these in the same way (Labov et al., 2006, p. 56).
- Complete father/bother merger – Once again diverging from NENE, the southeastern part of New England has completely merged these vowels, using [ɑ] exclusively (Johnson, 2010, 100).
- The lack of Mary/marry/merry merger – Speakers in the southeastern part of New England typically report using two or three different vowels when producing these words (Labov et al., 2006, p. 227).
- Canadian raising & Broad a – These two phenomena occur on a similar scale as in NENE, (Labov, et al., 2006).
- Backing of the start/palm vowel – While NENE fronts this vowel, SENE has adopted a reverse approach, pushing this vowel back, and pronouncing “car” as [k^hɑ:] (Labov et al., 2006, p. 111).
- Specific lexical items – Among the words used specifically in this area, “cabinet” (milkshake), “green” (public park), or “pizza strips” (local Italian specialty) are the most frequent (Big 7 Travel Team, 2020).

3.3 Dialects in Southwestern New England (SWNE)

As presented by Carver, the Southwestern area of New England comprises the majority of Connecticut and southwestern Massachusetts.

The SWNE area is strongly defined by:

- Rhoticity – Unlike NENE and SENE, the southwest of New England is markedly rhotic, similarly to the rest of the United States (Labov, et al., 2006, p. 227).
- The lack of cot/caught merger – Baring resemblance to SENE, the merger of cot/caught is incomplete, particularly in the coastal areas of Connecticut (Boberg, 2001, pp. 19-27).
- Horse/hoarse merger, Father-bother merger, Mary/marry/merry merger – All of these mergers are complete (Labov, et al., 2006).
- Partial Canadian raising – While Canadian raising does occur in this area, it is confined only to the [aɪ] diphthong (Boberg, 2010, p. 156).
- Slight fronting – While not as frequently as in NENE and NWNE, the vowel [a] is sometimes fronted toward [ɛ] as well (Boberg, 2001, p. 14).
- Specific lexical items – This area seems to produce the smallest number of idiosyncratic expressions, though words like “grinder” (sub), and “tag sale” (garage sale) can be found (Harvard Dialect Survey, 2003).

3.4 Dialects in Northwestern New England (NWNE)

The remaining parts of New England – western Vermont and northwestern parts of Massachusetts are grouped together as Northwestern New England.

The NWNE area is strongly defined by:

- Rhoticity – Similarly to its southern neighbor, NWNE is rhotic (Labov, et al., 2006, p. 227).
- Glottalization – A phenomenon traditionally associated with Estuary English, glottalization has found its way into the speech of western Vermonters, being particularly present in the younger female generation and spreading out to the rest of New England (Kortmann & Schneider, 2008, p. 278).
- Cot/caught merger, Horse/hoarse merger, Father-bother merger, Mary/marry/merry merger – The area of NWNE has completely merged the vowels in all these pairs (Boberg, 2001, p. 17).
- Partial Canadian raising – The pattern of SWNE is repeated here, with only the [aɪ] diphthong being raised (Boberg, 2010, p. 156).
- Fronting – The strongest form of fronting occurs before the /ɪ/ sound, resulting in the fronted vowels such as /ä/ or even /a/ in words such as “far,” transcribed as [fäɪ] or [faɪ] (Nagy & Roberts, 2004, pp. 60-61).

- Specific lexical items – Examples may be found in words such as “flatlander” (out-of-towner), “leaf peepers” (tourists traveling to Vermont to ogle the fall foliage), or “chinin” (disposing of snow) (Grimes, 2020).

To summarize the abovementioned characteristics, Table 1 succinctly compares all major phenomena and their occurrences across New England.

	rhoticity	cot-caught merger	horse-hoarse merger	father-bother merger	Mary-marry-merry merger	Canadian raising	fronting
NENE	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES
SENE	NO	NO	mostly YES	YES	NO	YES	NO
SWNE	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	partially YES	YES
NWNE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	partially YES	YES

Table 1: Comparison of NE dialect features.

While this table may suggest that the dialects of New England are, in fact, very incongruous, it must be noted that much of the academic discourse points to the similarities pervading the region (Kurath, 1939), (Stanford, 2019,) or (Labov, et al., 2006). Among these features are the general proclivity for raising the short “a” sound before nasal consonants, the quick spread of glottalization from Vermont, and a high sensibility to Canadian raising (Labov et al., 2006, pp. 224-232). Moreover, the entire region is tied together by numerous commonly recognized lexical items, such as “nor’easter” (a strong storm typical of the region), “wicked” (an intensifier), or “bubler” (a water fountain) (Roberts et al., 2006, p. 62).

4. Historical development of NE dialects in relation to British English

A bulk of current research (Bailey, 2015) (Wolfram & Schilling, 1998) argues that due to their remarkable conservatism and clear historical ties, the dialects of New England are a unique instance of language frozen in time. Sources even point to the use of certain words, for example, the 14th century-term “rowan,” (meaning “a second crop grown in a hayfield which has been harvested”) long forgotten in its homeland of England, but still in occasional use in conservative New England (Wolfram & Schilling, 1998, p. 120). Besides that, New England dialects clearly share several traits with eastern dialects of British English, most prominently the already mentioned non-rhoticity and glottalization, along with some vowel similarities traceable to the 16th and 17th-century Britain, some still present in NENE, as seen in Table 2 (Johnson, 2010, p. 24). The next section of the paper will examine the rich historical development of New England dialects in relation to their British predecessors.

Pronunciation of Low Vowel Word Classes:
Developing Standard British English (Sixteenth–Seventeenth Century)

[æ]~[a]	[a:]	[ɔ]~[ɒ]	[ɔ:]	[au]~[ɔu]
(BATH)	(BATH)	LOT	(THOUGHT)	(THOUGHT)
TRAP	(PALM)	(CLOTH)	(CLOTH)	(PALM)
(dance)	(half)		(half)	(half)
(father)	(dance)		(dance)	(dance)
	(father)	(broad)	(broad)	
	START		NORTH	

Pronunciation of Low Vowel Word Classes:
Eastern New England (Modern Boston)

[æ]	[a:]	[ɔ:]
TRAP	PALM	THOUGHT
(BATH)	(BATH)	<i>broad</i>
(half)	(half)	LOT
[ɛə]	<i>father</i>	CLOTH
<i>dance</i>	START	NORTH

Table 2: Comparison of the vowels used in the 16th and 17th-century Britain and those used in modern Boston. The red circles indicate identical vowels, the blue circles indicate the same vowel, however, its length differs (Johnson, 2010, p. 24)

4.1 The First Settlers

The British settlement of New England famously began with the arrival of the *Mayflower* in 1620. Leaving England primarily for religious reasons, several notable phenomena tie the first immigrant population together, all of which contributed to their language and speech patterns. Most of the newcomers hailed from southeastern and eastern England, particularly the Suffolk, Essex, or Norfolk counties (Fischer, 1989, p. 31). Due to the proximity of universities, large numbers of the Pilgrims were well-educated, about two-thirds of them being able to sign their name (the period average was only about one-third). They also came from mostly strong and stable financial backgrounds. A single ship ticket to America cost about £8 at the time, a sum

most could not save in an entire year. Since people traveled not as individuals, but in large, tight-knit families, those who could afford to pay for several tickets were mostly employed as skilled merchants, artisans, craftsmen, or were members of the gentry. In other words, the absolute majority of the first Pilgrims came from homogenous, educated, and upper-class backgrounds. (Fischer, 1989, pp. 25-36).

While omnipresent nowadays, the non-rhoticity of the British Isles in the 1630s was perhaps surprisingly low, at only around 5-10%, with its epicenters in the south and southeast of England (Bailey, 2015, p. 40). Appearing as a new trend, non-rhoticity found its home in the upper-class speakers with higher levels of education who were trying to distinguish themselves from the

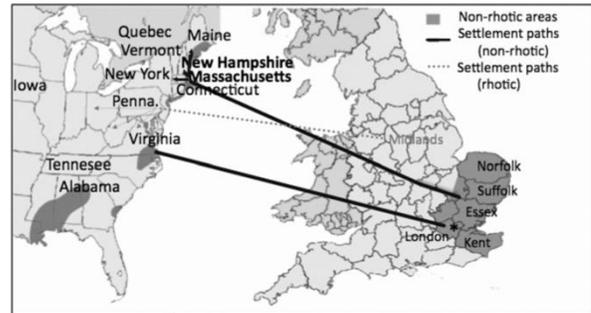


Figure 4: The sources of non-rhoticity transported to America (Nagy & Irwin, 2010, p. 244)

lower classes – a pattern conspicuously copying the lives of the people aboard the ships arriving in New England between 1620 and 1641. So, while the overall presence of non-rhoticity in England was faint, it is logically surmisable that the percentage of non-rhotic speakers coming to America must have been much higher. Those who were most likely to speak in a non-rhotic dialect were also most likely to leave for America. Figure 4 shows the local distribution of non-rhotic speakers in England overlapping with areas from which Puritans most frequently journeyed to the New World, further supporting the previous statement.

4.2 Patterns of British settlement and their linguistic consequences

The majority of the first settlers arrived in the coastal areas of Massachusetts, establishing the Plymouth Colony in 1620, and the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Both settlements were overwhelmingly Puritan, British, and secluded. The Pilgrims formed tight communities that enforced uniformity and austerity in all ways of life – religion, family, and even language. The r-less dialect spoken by the wealthy was deemed universally prestigious and desirable, and its reproduction soon became the norm (Fischer, 1989, pp. 57-62). Pieces of evidence may be found in the written records of eastern New England towns, including expressions such as “Mos” for “Morse,” “fouth” for “fourth,” or “bud” for “bird,” that Pilgrims sometimes mistakenly transcribed the way they would pronounce them – non-rhotically (Bailey, 2015, p. 40).

However, eastern Massachusetts soon proved to be an unwelcoming new home. The infertility of coastal soils along with the inclemency of long northern winters caused many to die or return to England. Those who stayed either adapted, or decided to venture westward, crossing the Connecticut River, and finding shelter in western Massachusetts and Connecticut (Schumacher, 2006, p. 38). In the meantime, the news of the possibility to travel to America spread through Britain, and a growing number of people began saving money and leaving. This new, second wave of migration, however, was much more diverse than the initial one. Brits from other parts of the country, such as the western counties of Dorset or Devon, or even Scotland and Ireland began boarding the New England-bound ships (Fischer, 1989, p. 34). Nonetheless, being aware of the egalitarianism and exclusivity forged in the Puritan colonies of eastern Massachusetts, they opted to settle in other parts of New England, such as Connecticut or western Massachusetts, knowing they would not be socially accepted in Boston or Plymouth (Fischer, 1989, p. 174).

Importantly, the novelty of the English r-less dialect had not reached much outside of East Anglia at the time of the departure of the second wave of immigrants, and their speech was therefore rhotic. When the previously mentioned first-wave non-rhotic departees from Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth met the arriving second-wave rhotic immigrants in western Massachusetts and Connecticut, the minority r-less dialect quickly disappeared, hence the current rhoticity of the SWNE region (Schumacher, 2006, p. 38). Simultaneously, the Connecticut River and the Green Mountains presented a formidable barrier that only a few dared to cross, essentially creating two separate speech communities – the rhotic west, and the non-rhotic east. Lastly, it is also important to mention the strong presence of religion in the life of the first settlers. In 1638, Roger Williams, ousted from Boston for his novel religious beliefs, founded Providence (today's capital of Rhode Island). While a certain form of geographical and religious isolation between Rhode Island and Massachusetts did exist, due to their easy naval accessibility, the two places remained in touch, resulting in the retention of r-lessness in Providence and the surrounding area (Johnson, 2010, p. 17). This religion-motivated citizen expulsion hence resulted in the dissemination of non-rhoticity southeastward and further accentuated the differences between the east and west of New England.

4.3 NE Dialects up to the 20th century

Naturally, the first few generations of immigrants arriving in New England would not have contributed much to the change of the dialects, especially in the east. We can find evidence for the strong use of southeastern British English in the transcripts of the Salem Witch Trials from 1692, pointing to the use of southeastern British grammatical constructions and the uniformity of language (Bailey, 2015, pp. 41-42). Other period records allude to the lively naval connection between eastern New England and London, with the two places essentially symbiotically re-enforcing their non-rhoticity throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Stanford, 2019, pp. 65-66). It is quite astounding that despite the vast gap the Atlantic Ocean presented, the English of the eastern colonists became so alike the one used in Britain that in 1836, it forced Noah Webster, the father of the codification of modern American English, to observe that “Educated men in New England speak the language almost precisely as the same classes do in England. I have been several hours in company with gentlemen in Cambridge, England, without hearing any difference of pronunciation which would distinguish an Englishman from an American” (Stanford, 2019, p. 66). The permeating influence of eastern New England further resulted in its expansion northward, reaching the area of today’s western New Hampshire and eastern Vermont between the years 1726 and 1776 (Stanford, 2019, p. 65), while Maine remained a part of Massachusetts until it gained statehood in 1820 (Smith, 2006, p. 71). The eastern dialects imported here during this century persevered and contributed to the present categorization of this area as NENE.

There is a relative paucity of information about western New England (being bereft of the constant transatlantic connection), though records show that migration from rhotic parts of Britain continued or passed through here. Gradually, the southwestern New England dialect spread north along the Connecticut River and found its home in the area that would become the state of Vermont in 1791. Perhaps more importantly, rhoticity followed those who continued to farther parts of the continent as well, and southwestern New England hence significantly helped the spread of today’s well-known American rhoticity across the entire country (Wolfram & Schilling, 2012, p. 112). It would, however, be erroneous to underestimate the influence of Boston either, particularly in the 19th century, when the formerly small harbor town grew to an immensely important center of naval trade and higher education. This can be best exemplified by

the “exportation” of non-rhoticity to New York City that occurred around that time, forming the foundation of the infamous New York City dialect that persists even today (Wolfram & Schilling, 1998, p. 100). A map portraying the early settlement patterns of eastern and western New England can be seen in Figure 5.

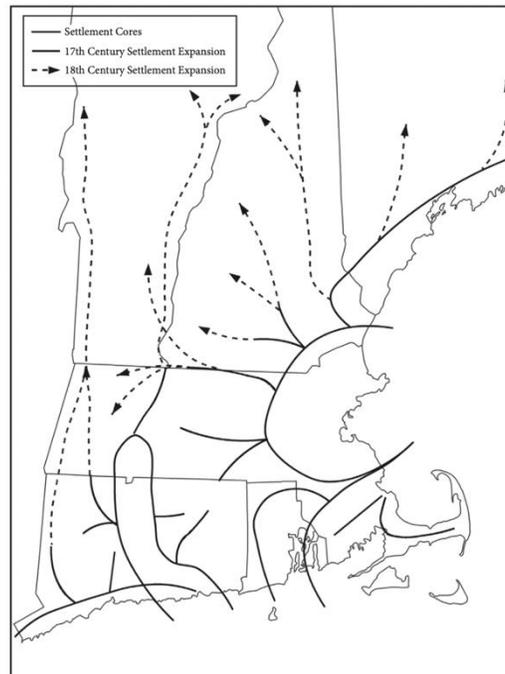


Figure 5: Settlement patterns in the 17th and 18th century (Stanford, 2019, 64)

The relative isolation of eastern and western New England presented a solid status quo for about three centuries. British English remained to be influential, particularly in the east, though historical events, such as the outbreak of the Revolutionary War in 1775 and the subsequent emergence of the United States as an independent country trying to forge its own language standards gradually severed some of the firm New

England-Great Britain ties. Some of the typically British traits either froze in time or gradually started diverging toward the emerging General American English, a process that was then dramatically sped up with the onset of the 20th century (Bailey, 2015, pp. 39-47).

4.4 20th century

While the turn of the century might have symbolized the advent of new technologies and social movements, the language of the US was subjected to a certain regression in the form of the Transatlantic (or Mid-Atlantic) dialect. This artificially created dialect combined the most desirable traits of British and American English and was used primarily by the upper classes and the entertainment business (Fallows, 2015). Due to the familiarity with British dialects and the large numbers of affluent residents, it is perhaps unsurprising that New England took particularly well to this variant, sometimes referred to locally as Cultivated New England English, with President John F. Kennedy (born in Massachusetts) being one of its prominent speakers (Knight, 1997, p. 160).

Nonetheless, the second half of the 20th century witnessed a slackening of this “transatlantic grip” on the language, while the growing modern interconnectedness within the region began making even large distances insignificant. New Englanders began to move out of

state, while Americans from other parts of the country poured in with their own dialects. While Kurath was able to draw his line separating western and eastern New England still relatively easily in 1939, the changes alluded to by Carver's Line from 1987 already show the changing landscape of New England dialects, a gradual but strong process that is continuing today.

4.5 Current developments

The latest research on the current state of New England dialects serves as a testament to the trends set in the previous century. In the *Atlas of North American English*, published in 2006, William Labov reports on the intermixing of many dialectal features previously separated by geography and the lack of contact. This resultant miscellany and "disorderliness" can perhaps best be exemplified by the summary in Table 1. An interesting new development that has emerged recently can be observed in New Hampshire, an area that has been traditionally categorized as NENE. Here, young speakers are completely rhotic, often citing their effort to differentiate themselves from the "Massholes" and Bostonians whom they perceive as unflatteringly non-rhotic, often eliciting old-fashioned sentiments (Nagy, 2001) (Platt, 2015). Other works of research (Davis et al., 1999) support these findings and call for the shift of the Kurath's and Carver's Lines eastward to truly reflect the state of dialectal affairs in the 2020s.

5. Conclusion

As it has been shown, the dialects of New England are not only incredibly varied, but also strongly shaped by their humble British beginnings and the journey they have walked since. Norman Rockwell, a prominent 20th-century painter once said that "Here in New England, the character is strong and unshakable" (Quotes.org, n.d.). While no one can justifiably question the moral and cultural strength of New Englanders, their dialects no longer seem as unshakable as they once did. Many analyses point to the increasing loss of non-rhoticity, strong vowel merging, and the overall shift to General American English. Alas, not everything is lost. A new wave of appreciation for the dialects seems to be underway, particularly in Maine and Massachusetts (Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 64). Massachusetts Police does not shy away from issuing statements advising drivers to "use yah blinkah," (Berman, 2014) because "a wicked big stawm is comin,'" (Freetown Police Department, 2017). The future of New England dialects is hence very much

dependent on the approach of their speakers, and future research will reveal just how prevalent they truly are, especially in the face of their long colonial history.

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