

Literary Dialect: the Study of Southern American English as Appeared in John Steinbeck's Novels

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine Southern American English (SAE) in literature, using John Steinbeck's three novels; *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* as the samplings, with a focus on phonology, grammar, and lexis. The checklists combined from the frameworks on Southern dialect in literary works were created to collect data of phonological features (from the eye dialect) and grammatical features. For lexical features, the concordance software AntConc was employed. The findings revealed the characteristics of Southern American English together with the use of non-standard English which non-native students can approach without having to observe in a real speech community. Furthermore, it can bring students' attention on literary dialect, especially on its importance as a reflection of actual language.

Keywords: Literary dialect; Southern American English; John Steinbeck

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษถิ่นใต้ในสหรัฐอเมริกาผ่านนวนิยาย โดยศึกษาเรื่องเสียง ไวยากรณ์ และคำศัพท์ มีกลุ่มตัวอย่างของงานวิจัยคืองานเขียนสามเรื่องซึ่งแต่งโดยจอห์น สไตน์เบ็ค ได้แก่ *In Dubious Battle* (สาบศรัทธา) *Of Mice and Men* (เพื่อนยาก) และ *The Grapes of Wrath* (ผลพวงแห่งความคับแค้น) โดยผู้วิจัยได้สร้างเครื่องมือเก็บข้อมูลทางเสียงและไวยากรณ์ที่รวบรวมจากงานวิจัยที่ได้มีผู้ศึกษาภาษาถิ่นใต้ในอเมริกาผ่านงานเขียน และได้ใช้โปรแกรม AntConc หรือโปรแกรมในการหาคำที่มีความสอดคล้องในการหาคำศัพท์ ผลของงานวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นถึงลักษณะการใช้ภาษาอเมริกันถิ่นใต้ รวมไปถึงรูปแบบการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษแบบไม่มาตรฐานผ่านงานเขียน โดยที่ไม่ต้องเข้าไปเก็บข้อมูลหรือศึกษาจากแหล่งจริง อีกทั้งยังเพิ่มความสนใจของผู้เรียนในเรื่องของภาษาถิ่นในงานวรรณกรรม ซึ่งสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงการใช้ภาษาจริงในสังคมนั้นๆ

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาถิ่นในงานวรรณกรรม; ภาษาอังกฤษแบบอเมริกันถิ่นใต้; จอห์น สไตน์เบ็ค

1. Introduction

The study of American dialects offers an interesting approach to learn about language in relation to speakers' culture and society. Speakers of each American dialect have their own grammar, vocabulary, syntax and common expression as well as pronunciation rules that make it unique from other parts of the States. American dialect not only gains much attention in the real world but also in literary works. Writers use dialect to add local color to their writings, to identify a character by showing his or her educational and cultural background, and general attitudes.

Southern dialect, as one of American dialects, has long been a part of southern uniqueness. It is the most well-known and the most studied dialect of American English (Preston; 1997, Nagel and Sanders; 2003,

Kirkpatrick, 2007). Southern dialect is also spoken by people in some part of California where migrants from the south-central states settled. The distinctiveness of southern region has also been noticed through written language, as it has been examined through fiction (Wood, 2009).

To explore Southern American English through literature in this study, the researcher chose the works of John Steinbeck who is the America's iconic writer of the twentieth century and the Nobel Prize award winner in literature. *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* were analyzed in terms of phonology, syntax, and, lexicon. These novels are considered the Dustbowl trilogy which explores the lives of migrant labors in California during the Great Depression who moved from the south. The characters in the novels, therefore, speak with Southern American English. Although Steinbeck is not originally from the south, the southern voices in his novels are accepted by many critics as they are regarded as resemblance to the works of William Faulkner—a famous Nobel Prize Southern writer (N.J., 1974). His novel is an ideal to learn about language in the south as he introduced readers to realistic casts of characters and told intriguing story of the lives of real people.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Dialect in Literature

One of the approaches in studying a dialect in literature is stylistic which considers how effective of the speech of particular texts is and to considered a role of that dialect as a whole. In the context of literature, folklore, and other written forms, the speech of an individual is orthographically marked as differing from a perceived standard language. Though no one single linguistic feature characterizes a dialect, and although particular features tend not to occur categorically in a dialect, a writer can

successfully portray the linguistic tendencies of a group by employing a particular set of usages that approximate the actual speech of that group.

2.2 Southern American English (SAE)

The first origins of Southern American English are in the initial colonial settlement by British immigrants. But Southern American English is not derived solely from one wave of settlement. Fischer (1989) suggested that it consisted of many immigrants. Southern American speech can be traced back to lower-class servants. The formative influence on Southern American English was the language of the African slave population. Therefore, there are some shared features between Southern American English and African American English.

Geographically, the South falls into two regions that have influenced the patterns of language in the land; The Upper South, and the Lower South. The Upper South includes the Piedmont area from Virginia to Georgia, Northwest Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. The Lower South includes the Tidewater and Coastal plains of Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Eastern Texas, and the Lowland areas of Arkansas and Western Tennessee (Burkett, 1978). Figure 1 shows the map of the United States. Number 1 is the South region while the area in no. 2 is a part of California where many migrant workers from the south-central states settled down.



Figure 1 Dialect map of Southern American
Source: Labov, Ash, and Boberg (2006)

2.2.1 Phonology

According to Dorrell (1987), there is no limit to the sound of Southern American English and the way of describing its accents. Generally, there are over 600 items concerned with phonology of English in the South. However, phonological features of SAE in literature can be divided into three categories as vowel and diphthong substitutions, consonant substitutions, and consonant omissions (Kinnebrew, 1983).

Table 1 Examples of phonological features

Feature	Example	Standard form
/æ/ to /ɪ/	kin	can
/e/ to /ɪ/	git	get
/o/ to /ə/	fella	fellow
/s/ to /st/ in final position	acrost	across
Final /d/ or /t/ deleted	min	mind
Unstressed syllables	'bout, ever	about, every

2.2.2 Grammar and Syntax

Like phonology, grammatical features of Southern American English are various due to variety of speakers. Yet, the prominent features of SAE features, according to Kinnebrew (1983), Bernstein (2003), and Wolfram & Estes (2004) are as illustrated in table 2.

Table 2 Examples of grammatical features of SAE

Feature	Example
Ain't	<i>He ain't my sister</i>
Double negative	<i>We didn't like nothing</i>
Copula absence	<i>They nice, She nice</i>
3 rd singular absence	<i>She like_ cat</i>
A – prefixing	<i>He was a-fishin'</i>

2.2.3 Lexis

Most Southern words are new terms or adaptations of old words. Many of the South's words are folk-like sounding and are related to rural and farming life. Below is some glossaries taken from Connie Eble (1996), Professor of English at the University of North Carolina which she collected from Malin (1972) as well as drawn from websites.

Alligator pear = Avocado	Bad mouth = Speak unfavorably
Crazy bone = Elbow	Locker = Closet
Mosquito hawk = Dragon fly	Shed = Small storage Building
Slaughter pole = Cane pole for fishing	
Tumbleset = Summersault	

2.3 John Steinbeck's Life and Work

Steinbeck grew up in the Salinas Valley region of California, a culturally diverse place of rich migratory and immigrant history. Steinbeck's

novels can all be classified as social novels dealing with the economic problems of rural labor. One of the serious and aggressive fictions he wrote is *In Dubious Battle* (1936), which deals with the strikes of the migratory fruit pickers on California plantations. This was followed by *Of Mice and Men* (1937), the story of the migrant workers. Lastly, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the story of Oklahoma tenant farmers moved to California where they became migratory workers.

3. Methodology

In order to analyze Southern American English in John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, the researcher created checklists from the frameworks. Phonological and grammatical checklists included features, excerpts from the novel and quotations from the characters. When reading through conversation between characters, the researcher manually checked the features found. For lexical features, it was automatically analyzed by the concordance software; AntConc. The procedure was to insert a file of Southern glossary, as well as the novel files and ran the program.

4. Results

4.1 Phonological Features

The characters who are supposedly speaker of SAE produced some sounds that are different from the standard American words, for example the word '*fawther*' with /ɔ/ sound instead of /ɑ/ as in '*father*'. There are five non-standard features appeared in the data.

Table 3 The results of vowel and diphthong substitution

Non-standard forms	Excerpts	Standard forms	No. of occurrence
1. /ɔ/ or /u/ to /ə/	gonna, wanta, outa, kinda	going to, want to, out of, kind of	938
2. /o/ to /ə/	fella, pilla, yella	fellow, pillow, yellow	470
3. /e/ to /ɪ/	git	get	191
4. /ɑ/ to /ɔ/	awright, awmighty, awready	alright, almighty, already	135
5. /æ/ to /ɪ/	kin	can	21

From table 3 there are two prominent non-standard features of vowel and diphthong substitutions which are /o/ to /ə/, and /ɔ/ or /u/ to /ə/.

1) /o/ to /ə/ sound

The /o/ sound that is replaced by the /ə/ sound normally occurs when the sound follows the stressed syllables. In such case, the last syllables of the words '*fellow*', '*tomorrow*', '*pillow*', and '*yellow*' became weaker.

- You come to a good place, **fella** [IDB, p.148]
- **tomorra** we gonna go [OMM, p.9]
- all but a sofa **pilla** [TGW, p.27]

2) /ɔ/ or /u/ to /ə/ sound

This feature is the most prominent non-standard feature with the highest occurrence. It shows how the speakers use colloquial to make the words easy and fast to pronounce.

- *I can't get that **outa** my head* [IDB, p.425]
- *we **had**da walk ten miles* [OMM, p.23]
- *ya **wanta** squeeze in with us an' go?* [TGW, p.72]

Like vowel and diphthong substitutions, consonant substitutions are what make speakers of SAE sound different from speakers of Standard English. However, noticing these features may be difficult for non-native speakers or even to native speakers of other parts of the United States to perceive since some words are pronounced closely to what average Americans said; only a single sound is changed or is dropped. Therefore, one good thing about studying Southern American English through literature is that the author can be regarded as a linguist who indirectly transcribes words without using phonetic symbols. The results of consonant substitutions are shown in table 4.

Table 4 The results of consonant substitutions

Non-standard forms	Excerpts	Standard forms	No. of occurrence
1. Final /ɪ/ to /In/	workin', somethin', tryin'	working, something, trying	2,836
2. /skd/ at the end of the word to /st/	ast	ask	41
3. /s/ to /st/ in final position	acrost	across	27

The most common way Steinbeck used to convey consonant substitutions feature is to employ alternation of /In/. It could be implied that this non-standard feature may cause the least misunderstanding of words used because readers can still know what standard form of the word is.

1) Final /iŋ/ to /In/

- *I just thought of **somethin'*** [IDB, p.207]
- *I'm jus' **tryin'** to tell you* [OMM, p.62]
- *Now he's **starvin'*** [TGW, p.310]

The last group of Southern American English phonological features is consonant omissions. The data in table 5 shows that there are five non-standard features.

Table 5 The results of consonant omissions

Non-standard forms	Excerpts	Standard forms	No. of occurrence
1. Final /d/ or /t/	an', jus', tol'	and, just, told	4,225
2. Unstressed syllables	'member, 'night, 'course, s'pose,	remember, goodnight, of course, suppose	855
3. /k/ before /tʃ/	pitcher	picture	22
4. /t/ or /v/ before /m/	lemme, gimme	let me, give me	21
5. /t/ after /n/	wanna	want to	14

The most apparent non-standard feature of consonant omissions is the omission of /d/ or /t/ at the final position. To convey this

phonetic feature, Steinbeck replaced the missing consonants and syllables with apostrophe ('). Therefore, words such as 'and', 'hand', and 'just' are written as *an'*, *han'* and *jus'*. Here are the examples from the novels.

1) Final /d/ or /t/

- *Jus'* remember it later [IDB, p.301]
- don't you do no messing *aroun'* with him [OMM, p.79]
- *Lef'* the buckets out for you fellas [TGW, p.128]

4.2 Grammatical features

The result shown ten grammatical deviations marked in data.

Table 6 The results of grammatical features

Features	No. of occurrence	Excerpts
1. Ain't	1,189	<i>It ain't a nice way to talk</i> [TGW]
2. Double negative	1,129	<i>it wasn't no fault of mine</i> [TGW]
3. Copula absence	502	<i>You boy working here?</i> [IDB]
4. A – prefixing	347	<i>I been a-thinkin' a lot</i> [TGW]
5. Substitution of was and were	241	<i>We was drivin' all night</i> [TGW]
6. Generalized part./past	192	<i>You done a hell of a lot</i> [IDB]
7. Regularization (irregular verb)	71	<i>I knowed his aunt Clara</i> [OMM]
8. General plural absence	30	<i>I notice all stuff like that</i> [TGW]
9. 3rd singular absence	15	<i>Who hurt George?</i> [OMM]
10. Fixin' to	4	<i>You're fixin' to make a speech</i> [TGW]

The two highlighted features are also aspects of non-standard dialect. Firstly, *Ain't*. 'Ain't' that attributes to Southern dialect use for short terms of *am not*, *is not*, and *are not*. For instances:

Grammar deviation: I *ain't* Dakin. [IDB, p.499]

Standard English: I *am not* Dakin.

Grammar deviation: he *ain't* gonna be mean. [OMM, p.101]

Standard English: he *is not* going to be mean.

Secondly, double negative. The sentences comprised of words such as 'no', 'none', or 'nothing' in a simple negative sentence as shown in the excerpts.

Grammar deviation: *Don't* you get into *no* bad company [IDB, p.255].

Standard English: Don't you get into *any* bad company.

Grammar deviation: You *ain't* gonna get *no* argument [TGW, p.245].

Standard English: You *are not* going to get *any* argument.

4.3 Lexical features

After automatically identifying Southern lexical using the software *AntConc*, thirteen Southern vocabularies are found. They are arranged alphabetically with the excerpts from the novel, including the novel name and page number.

Awfully in the Southern context is the expression substitute for 'very'. For instances, *I'm awfully lonely* [IDB, p.533], *The men are quiet, awfully quiet* [IDB, p.579].

Ever' is a quick form of the word *every*. It also regarded to one of the phonological features; the unstressed syllable. 'Ever' can be either occurred alone or followed by a word such as 'ever'thing'. For example, *Seems like ever' guy got land in his head* [OMM, p.75], *Ever' word you say is sense* [TGW, p.39].

Ever'body is a pronoun means *not excluding anyone*. Instances of 'ever'body' are; *I'll set in some poolroom till ever'body goes home* [OMM, p.93], *Ever'body that ain't here is a black sinner* [TGW, p.219].

Finxin' or '**fixin' to**' uses as an auxiliary verb, meaning *getting ready to*. The excerpts from the novel are; *London's fixin' to sell out* [IDB, p.407], *They're fixin' to go* [TGW, p.45].

Hafta or '*have to*' is an auxiliary verb. This modal auxiliary indicates obligation while the use of '*must*' is hardly found in most Southern dialects. The examples are; *they'll be mis'able fore they hafta* [TGW, p.138], *I'll hafta be goin' away* [TGW, p.290].

High-falutin' is an adjective meaning '*extremely fancy*' as in *he didn't get anywhere with his high-falutin' ideas* [IDB, p.59], *It's real, not any of your high-falutin' ideas* [IDB, p.432].

Holt is used as an adjective, meaning '*in a hand(s)*'. The excerpts from the data are; *roll in under here an' grab a-holt* [TGW, p.115], *Muley's got a-holt of somepin* [TGW, p.33].

Idear is a form of the word '*idea*'. Instances of usage are; *Got any idears what to do?* [IDB, p.202], *ain't you got any idear?* [OMM, p.92], *Might be a good idear to go* [TGW, p.179].

Kilt is a Southern past tense of 'kill'. It appeared only one time in *The grapes of Wrath* as *Nobody kilt him* [TGW, p.96].

'Member is a short term for 'remember'. It occurs from the omission of the unstressed syllable 're' as in *'Member what he said?* [IDB, p.377], *'Member the las' couple days?* [TGW, p.116].

Purdy, sometimes written as 'purty' is an adjective meaning *lovely*, and *nearly* or *quite*. The examples from the data are; *She's purty* [OMM, p.27], *Purty much froze with grease* [TGW, p.120].

Sump'n or 'somepin', depending on the author preference, is the way of saying 'something' by some Southerners. The term occurred only in *The Grapes of Wrath* as the examples; *I'll tell you somepin* [TGW, p.139], *Somepin happened to me* [TGW, p.143].

Them in the Southern context is a pronoun used to replace 'those'. The examples are; *All them nice apples!* [IDB, p.149], *You said about them rabbits* [OMM, p.74], *An' all them things is true* [TGW, p.35].

5. Conclusion

The study showed the reflection of Southern American English through Steinbeck's three novels. Apart from the aspects of Southern speech, some features are traits of non-standard English that occurs in the dialect of other regions as well. The features that are regarded as Southern speech are; for instance, *a-prefixing* and *fixing to*, while non-standard form such as *final /In/*, *double negative*, and *ain't* are also uttered by speakers of working class or lower class from other regions and by speakers of African American English. Nevertheless, the forms of Southern dialect that appear in literature have limitations. Steinbeck created his own choice of language to

suit each character. He formed new spelling to stress the eye dialect-- using non-standard spelling to approximate a pronunciation, and to give an illusion of reality to fictional character, for example the word “*something*” which he deviated the standard and corrected spelling by using *somepin’* or *sumpin’* although this attempts to deal with phonology maybe ambiguous. As suggested by Ives (1971), the primary purpose of a literary dialect was not to create an accurate record of regional speech. The Southern dialect in Steinbeck’s selected novels illustrated how Southern dialect functions in literature as a whole which can be valuable to non-native students of the English language whose may not have a chance to observe in a real speech community.

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