



Phonological Features: Standard British English and The West Countries Dialects

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Abstract

In the world of global Englishes, pronunciation is varied, and there are distinctive phonological features that make one dialect different from others. The standard phonological features are usually used in formal contexts, such as conferences, academic classrooms, and bureaucratic settings. Outside these contexts, hearing different phonological variations is regarded as an everyday practice. While previous studies focused on standard varieties of English, such as American English, British English, and Australian English, this academic paper describes the differences in phonological features between Standard British English and the West Country dialects in England. The phonological features of West Country dialects in England are unique to study because the most distinctive feature was consonants, while other British dialects commonly appear to be the phonological features of vowels. This study gathered information from different sources, such as academic textbooks, academic research articles, and different reliable websites, such as the BBC. The data were read carefully and described into seven distinctive phonological features of the West Countries. Some exemplifications are the substitution of the phoneme /v/ by /f/. In addition, the phoneme /z/ is articulated in place of /s/. Because of these, the voice of people in the West Country was perceived as having lower prestige in comparison with RP. The authors expected that the results of this study would be useful for EFL learners to understand the nature of articulation in different English dialects. So, they can avoid judging the pronunciation of local British dialects.

Keywords: Phonology, Segmental Phonological Features, Standard British English, the West Countries dialects

1. Introduction

As mentioned earlier, Standard British English and the West Country dialects are two varieties of English that are distinctively different. Geographically, Standard British English is spoken in the regions of Cambridge, London, and Oxford, and these areas are commonly known as the *East Midland Triangles* (Braber & Robinson, 2018; Crystal, 1995). This refers to the geographical contribution of Standard British English (henceforward called SE). The other side of East Midland Triangles is the pier of the West Country (henceforward called WC),



Figure 1 The West Country (www.thehouseshop.com)

According to Figure, the areas of the West Country mainly cover Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Dorset, Wiltshire and Avon. However, Gloucestershire is included as part of the West Country as well.



Before the segmental phonological features of the two dialects are comparatively detailed, the pronunciation of SE and WC is demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparisons of Pronunciation between SE and WC

Standard British English (SE)	The West Country (WE)
The farmer sees thick three-furrow plough. We are going home.	The varmer zeez thik dhree-vurrow plough. Us be gwain awm

(Marten, 2002)

Table 1 illustrated how SE sounds in comparison with WE. When the issue of accents is raised to be compared, it leads to a question of what people's attitudes toward specific accents of SE and WC are. In England, SE, especially RP, interchangeably known as Queen's accent, has a value of prestige in contrast with WC. This claim can be supported by Coupland and Bishop's (2007) study, whereby 34 accents were surveyed for patterns of accent evaluation concerning prestige and social attractiveness. SE and WC are among the accents that were examined. Overall, it is surprising to see that the prestige of the WC is lower than that of the SE as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Attitudes towards Accents; Comparison between SE and WC Accents

Accents/Attitudes	Social Attractiveness		Prestige	
	Mean Rating	Ranking	Mean Rating	Ranking
Queen's English	4.28	7	5.59	1
Standard English	4.96	1	5.44	2
West Country	4.16	9	3.36	15

Table 2 reveals the social attractiveness of the West Country accent as the ninth rank out of 34 accents, and this is considered to be an acceptable ranking. On the other hand, the prestige of the West Country accent is in the fifteenth ranking. This implies that the prestige of the West Country accent is not widely and socially accepted in comparison with Queen's English and Standard English. Another reliable source from the BBC reported that the West Country dialects are viewed as having a pleasant and desirable accent. This report conforms to Coupland and Bishop's survey regarding the criteria of social attractiveness of the West Country dialects. This means that the connected speech of the West Country dialects has a relaxed rhythm, not to mention the qualities of being trustworthy and honest. As further indicated by McArthur (2001), the West Country accent is rusty, which means that it is an old and traditional accent. Despite positive attitudes, some people show a prejudice toward this accent in terms of the slowness in speech that may connote slow thinking of the speakers. Additionally, the BBC interviewed the native speakers of this accent, and one of the interviewees confessed as follows:

"My accent makes me sound thick and gives the impression that I have straw coming out of my mouth. Everyone thinks we are country people and live in a barn."

(Stafford, 2005, p. 1)

With this quotation, the question is raised to ask why most people's attitudes toward the West Country accents connote negative perceptions and why the prestige of the West Country dialects is ranked much lower than Queen's English accents and Standard English accents.

Most previous studies focused on the phonological studies of standard varieties of English, such as American English, British English, and Australian English. This current study innovatively contributed

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something new to the field by shedding light on the local dialect of British English called *the West Country dialects*. The purpose of this academic research paper is to compare and contrast segmental phonological features between Standard British English and the West Country dialects. The research question is: what are the systemic, structural, selectional, and phonetic realization differences between the West Country dialects and the Standard British accent? This information leads to the objectives of the study, as follows:

2. Objectives

To explain the similarities and differences in segmental phonological features between Standard British English and the West Country dialects.

3. Details

This academic research paper employs various sources, such as phonological textbooks, research articles, and academic research papers as information to compare and contrast the differences in segmental phonological features between Standard British English and the West Country dialects.

4. Results

Standard British English (SE) and the West Country dialects (WC) are considerably different regarding the sound of consonants. Despite the similarities in the numbers of consonants in stops, fricatives, nasals and approximants, the West Country dialects possess more limited distributions of consonant phonemes. The contrastive analysis of the systemic aspects between the two phonological segmental systems can be isolated into several aspects. The framework of the data analysis in this study was based on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

Where do the sounds of heaviness and thickness in West County, England, come from? Firstly, SE differs from WE in regard to fricative consonants. Even though SE and WC have the same number of fricative phonemes, they show a more limited distribution in WC. The phoneme of voiceless alveolar fricative is not found in WC, opposite to SE. This can be exemplified as in the lexical items of *Somerset* and *saddle* in SE, whereby *Zomerzet* and *zaddle* are pronounced instead in WC. The morpheme *mouse*, as in /maʊs/ in SE, is pronounced as [maʊz] in WC (Melchers & Shaw, 2011). Accordingly, the phoneme /s/ in the West Countries is articulated as [z] at the initial position, the middle position and the final position.

Distinctive Phoneme 1: /s/ → [z]

Secondly, the phoneme of the voiceless velar fricative stop is not available in SE, whereas this is a distinctive phoneme in WC (Braber & Robinson, 2018; Melchers & Shaw, 2011; Leech & Svartvik, 2006). This can be exemplified through the morpheme *ask*, as in [ɑ:sk] in SE. However, the same morpheme *ask* is pronounced as [ɑ:x] in WC. Up to this point, if one refers to Table 1 as pointed out in the first section again, this evidence allows us to understand why the lexical item *sees* in SE is pronounced as *zeez* in WC (McArther, 2001). The vocal cords of people in the West Country produce more vibration. This feature of the phoneme /s/, becoming /z/ in all positions of lexical items, is a distinctive linguistic feature of the indigenous people in WC. It can be noticed that the distinctive feature of the phoneme /z/ is that of the voiced sibilant, different from the phoneme /s/, which is a nonvoiced sibilant.

Thirdly, the phoneme /ŋ/, interchangeably known as voiced velar nasal stop, makes SE and WE distinctive from each other. To explain this, the phoneme /ŋ/ in SE is similar to WC in that it does not appear in the initial position of words. However, the phoneme /ŋ/ can occur in the medial position of words between the two dialects, such as *singer*. It is generally known in English that the phoneme /ŋ/ cannot occur in the initial position. If it does, it leads to phonological violations. It is common for the phoneme /ŋ/ in SE to be articulated in the final position. However, this feature was not found in the final position of lexical items in WE. To illustrate, the lexical items *boiling* as in /bɔɪlɪŋ/ and *making* as in /meɪkɪŋ/ in SE are pronounced as



bil-in and *maakin* in WC, respectively (Marten, 2002). To sum up this point, the phoneme /ŋ/ in WE has a more limited distribution in comparison with SE.

Distinctive Phoneme 2: the phoneme /ŋ/ of the WC in the final position → null

The phoneme /r/ is another distinctive feature that distinguishes SE from WC. Melchers and Shaw (2011) addressed the fact that SE is a non-rhotic accent. The phoneme /r/, interchangeably known as the alveolar approximant, is not articulated once preceded by a vowel. This means receipt pronunciation, or RP, has no r-sound when it is preceded by a vowel, for example, the morpheme *car* phonemically transcribes /ka:/ (Svartvik & Geoffrey, 2006). So, the phoneme /r/ is not articulated. On the contrary, WC has a rhotic accent, and the manner of the phoneme /r/ in WC is retroflex approximant. The phoneme /r/ in WC is preserved and articulated after a vowel. This aspect was found similarly to the accent of people in Ireland and most of North America (Demirezen, 2012; Leech & Svartvik, 2006; Melchers & Shaw, 2011). The prominent phonological distinctiveness between SE and WC regarding the phoneme /r/ can be demonstrated through the morpheme *herd*. This is articulated as /hɜ:d/ in SE, while it is pronounced as /hɜ:rd/ in WC. Another example can be compared to the morpheme *nurse*. The phonetic transcriptions of some exemplifications between RP and WE are given to be compared as in Table 3.

Table 3 Differences in Phoneme /r/ in Wordset Between RP and WC

Morphemes	Nurse	Barn
West Country Dialect	/nɜ:rs/	/ba:rn/
Received Pronunciation (RP)	/nɜ:s/	/ba:n/

(Leech & Svartvik, 2006, p.133)

Moreover, this phoneme /r/ in WC is not structured by either trill or the apical part of the tongue, but the sound was produced by a withdrawal of the tongue to the back of the mouth, technically known as *retroflex*. The preservation of the phoneme /r/ after vowels has been retained among indigenous people in WC (Leech & Svartvik, 2006) as stated as follows:

‘In West Country, the /r/ is formed not by a trill or tap of the tip of the tongue, as commonly in Scotland, but by a bunching of the tongue towards the back of the mouth, a so-called *retroflex* /r/, which yields a heavy burr sound often affecting the preceding vowel’.

(Leech & Svartvik, 2006, p. 133)

Along with this phenomenon of the phoneme /r/ in WC, Trudgill (2000) clearly provided a sociolinguistic explanation as to why the south-west areas of England have the preservation of the non-prevocalic phoneme /r/. He explained that the majority of citizens who resign in this area are older speakers. Not only are they considered part of the social stratification of the lower-class people in the British Isles, but they are also viewed as rhotic people or *r*-pronouncers. Under the definition of language and attitudes, rhotic accents are associated with different attitudes among British people. The articulation of /r/ pronunciation in the West Country in England may show stigmatization, or insultation, among users as farmers and agricultural and blue-collar workers (Hughes, Trudgill & Watt, 2013; Leech & Svartvik, 2006). This phenomenon of the phoneme /r/ in WC is possible to be explained by a historical reason. Demirezen (2012) explained that the British dialects were rhotic in Anglo-Saxon times, which is considered a r-full period where the phoneme /r/ is articulated with the place of articulation of the alveolar trill. Since the 17th century, the intensity of /r/ has declined due to the aristocracy. This is because the upper-class people in England show an attempt to distinguish their own identity from the lower-class people. Due to this reason, England has become a r-less society with non-rhotic accents. Nevertheless, WC has preserved the phoneme /r/ after vowels. To sum up



this point, the phoneme /r/ in SE possesses a more limited distribution than in WC, as the phoneme /r/ in RP is not articulated when it is preceded by a vowel.

Distinctive Phoneme 3: the phoneme /r/ of the WC after vowels → articulated

The phoneme /θ/, or voiceless apical labio-dental, is another distinctive phonological feature that obviously differentiates these two dialects in England. In WC, the phoneme /θ/ is not pronounced in the initial position of lexical items, while the phoneme /d/ is articulated instead. Historically, Baynes (1861) gave a reason why the phoneme /d/ is pronounced instead of the phoneme /θ/, due to an intonation reason. The phoneme /d/ makes the speaker's sound softer. For example, the phoneme /d/ in the initial positions of lexical items *three*, *thatch*, and *throat* in SE are pronounced as *dree*, *datch*, and *drooate*, respectively (Demirezen, 2012; Marten, 2002). Accordingly, the phoneme /θ/ in WC underlines a limited distribution. Clearly, it can be noticed that one of the qualities of /d/ is a voiced phoneme, different from the phoneme /θ/, which is nonvoiced. Voiced phonemes, especially in the initial position, are preferred by the indigenous people in WC.

Distinctive Phoneme 4: the phoneme /θ/ of the WC in the initial position → /d/

The selectional aspects between Standard British English (SE) and the West Country dialects (WC) are varied in terms of consonants, vowels, and non-syllabic vocoids interchangeably known as half vowels and half consonants, such as /w/. This variation is explained by the *selectional aspect*. According to Winkler, Radach, and Luksaneeyanawin (2009), the selectional aspect of the phonological system is that the occurrence of phonemes in the same word in different varieties of English can be different due to a variety of reasons. Exemplifications in this aspect can be revealed through the phoneme /f/ that becomes the phoneme /v/ in WC, as demonstrated through conversational following dialogue.

(1)

- | | |
|----------|--|
| Hannah: | Beant there many v yer in Lunnun? |
| Visitor: | Yes, unfortunately, too many. |
| Wife: | What do a think, Miss o'thic zilly lazz, Hannah?
Her and v ather walked zixteen miles to zee a v yer. |
| Visitor: | Were there many houses burnt? |
| Hannah: | Houzez burnt- noa, Mizz! There burnt nothing at all
burnt at v yer. |
| Visitor: | Not anything burnt at fires? |
| Hannah: | Noa, Mizz, it wazn't a v ier, but v yer. |

(Baynes, 1861, p. 17)

The dialogue above allows us to see that the phoneme /v/ is the distinctive phonological feature of WC. The phoneme /v/ is articulated in substitution of the phoneme /f/ in all initial positions, such as when the lexical item *first* is articulated as *vust* (Baynes, 1861). The lexical items *finger* and *father* in SE are pronounced as *vinger* and *vayther* in WC. The following excerpt is evident to support this fact. Wakelin's study of residents in West Country proves that the phoneme /v/ is pronounced /f/ in the initial position.

(2) **Distinctive Phoneme 4:** the phoneme /f/ of the WC in the initial position → /v/

- (a) When **v**ust I heard thy tuenful voice, I stood ameazd'd, and star, and gap'd away: -
[...] thr very cow **v**orgot to [...]
- (b) I can't zay as 'ow I bin gittin a **v**air chance wi they zarmens [...]
- (c) [...] an glaurivy yer **v**ather wich ex in hev n.

(Wakelin 1986, p. 150)

Not only does the phoneme /f/ become the phoneme /v/ in the initial position of the words, but ~~also~~ it may also sometimes occur in the final positions of lexical items. For example, the words *wife*, *leaf*, and *loaf*



in SE are pronounced as *wiave*, *leeave* and *looave* in WC, respectively. A reason to support the substitution of the phoneme /v/ can be explained under the scope of its original orthography in its history in Middle English (ME), as demonstrated in Table 5 below.

Table 4 The Originality of the Phoneme /v/ in Middle English

	ME	PDE
1220	<i>vor</i>	<i>for</i>
	<i>vifte</i>	<i>fifthe</i>
1300	<i>verst</i>	<i>first</i>
	<i>vaste</i>	<i>fast</i>
1387	<i>vair</i>	<i>fair</i>
	<i>veaw</i>	<i>few</i>

(Marten, 2002, p. 11)

Table 4 shows the orthography with the letter *v* in middle English. The unvoicing of /v/ in the initial, medial, and final positions in Present-Day English (PDE) was the phoneme /f/ in the period of Middle English. To illustrate, the lexical item *velfette*, discovered in Ashburton in 1548, has presently become *velvet*, phonetically transcribed as /velvɪt/ in British standard English. Another example is *l the ike festrye*, found in Morebath in 1533, which has presently become *vestry*, transcribed as /vestri/.

Along the same lines as selectional aspects, *h*-dropping and *h*-adding accents are also prominent aspects of distinguishing WC from SE accents (Alderton, 2019). When an aspirate phoneme /h/ is used in the initial position before a vowel in syllables, this aspirate /h/ will be unpronounced. Exemplifications of this usage are *hope*, *her*, and *holiday*, which are articulated as in *-ope*, *-er* and *-ollerday*. Occasionally, the phoneme /h/ can be inserted into certain lexical items so as to make the pronunciation more fancy. This *h*-adding phonological feature of WC is frequently articulated in phrases, such as *nice mhornin* and *mherry Christmas* (Marten, 2002; Alderton, 2019). Marten (2002) further explained that the phoneme /h/ is inserted between syllables due to hypercorrection, which is usually found in *h*-dropping accents.

Distinctive Phoneme 5: *h*-dropping and *h*-adding accents

The phoneme /m/ is occasionally used in substitution for the phoneme /n/. For example, the word *devon* is pronounced *dev`m* in WC. This phonological feature sometimes occurs in medial position, such as when the lexical item *evening* is usually pronounced *aivmin* (Braber & Robinson, 2018; Marten, 2002). This use is explained by assimilation for ease of articulation.

Distinctive Phoneme 6: the phoneme /n/ of the WC → /m/

The phoneme /t/ is usually substituted by the phoneme /d/. For example, *a lend of my horse* is pronounced *a lent o me `oss*. *My* and *me* are interchangeably used, for example, *where is me beg* for *where is my bag*. Another selectional difference between Standard British Dialect and the West Country Dialects is that the consonant phoneme in the initial position is modified to be non-syllabic vocoid. According to Marten (2002) and Baynes (1861), the phonemes /g/ and /h/ in the initial position in Standard British English are pronounced as /y/ in WC. This distinctive pronunciation is found in word like *gate*, pronouncing as *yaate*. Also, the word *heat* is pronounced as *yee-ate*.

Distinctive Phoneme 7: the phonemes /h/ and /g/ of the WC → /y/

Another selectional difference between these two dialects is found in terms of monophthong and diphthong. According to Melchers and Shaw (2011), the diphthong of the phoneme /ei/ such as the word 'face as in /feɪs/ is Standard British English, however, this word is pronounced as /ve:z/ in the West Country. This is because the diphthong of the phoneme /ei/ is pronounced as /e:/ in the West Country. Table 6 below



summarizes the selectional differences in sounds in words between Standard British English and the West Country dialect.

Table 5 Selectional Differences of in Phonemes in Words Between SE and WC

	SE	WC
1	<i>farmer</i>	<i>varmer</i>
2	<i>evening</i>	<i>aivmin</i>
3	<i>lend</i>	<i>lent</i>
4	<i>feathers</i>	<i>vevvers</i>
5	<i>gate</i>	<i>yaate</i>
6	<i>face</i>	<i>ve:z</i>

In terms of phonetic realization, the pronunciation of /r/ in the West Country dialects is the retroflex r. According to Melchers & Shaw (2011) and O'Grady (2013), the phoneme /r/ in RP is alveolar approximant, symbolized as /ɹ/. On the other hand, the phoneme /r/ in the West Country dialects is retroflex approximant, symbolized as /ɻ/, which makes the sound thicker and heavier.

Apart from consonants, Baynes (1861) revealed that Somersetshire dialects are rich in vowel-sounds. It constantly tends to make closed vowels open; long vowels short; pure words mixed; single vowels into double vowels, diphthongs, and even triphthongs. The vowels are lengthened and opened, such as *hond* for *hand*, and *vote* for *foot*. Another example can be illustrated through the words *dorke* and *lorke*, which are pronounced for *dark* and *lark*, respectively. In addition, the pronunciation of the words *bed* and *dead* is pronounced as *bade* and *dade* (Baynes, 1861).

In Somerset, vowels are mixed and doubled in words like *hay*, *day*, *may*, and *say*. These words are pronounced like *haye*, *days*, *maye*, and *saye*. The words *maaid* and *plaain* are usually pronounced instead of *maid* and *plain*, whereas the words *cauld* and *auver* are pronounced instead of *cold* and *over*. Additionally, substantial numbers of monosyllables in English are modified into disyllables in which vowels have become broad and open, as illustrated below.

(3)						
	<i>Bee-ast</i>	=	<i>beast</i>	<i>Mee-ate</i>	=	<i>meat</i>
	<i>Clee-an</i>	=	<i>clean</i>	<i>Mee-olk</i>	=	<i>milk</i>
	<i>Chee-ase</i>	=	<i>cheese</i>	<i>Nee-ad</i>	=	<i>need</i>
	<i>Chee-ars</i>	=	<i>chair</i>	<i>Zee-ade</i>	=	<i>seed</i>
	<i>Kee-ar</i>	=	<i>care</i>	<i>Zee-ape</i>	=	<i>sap</i>
	<i>Kee-ard</i>	=	<i>card</i>	<i>Vi-er</i>	=	<i>fire</i>
	<i>Gee-ame</i>	=	<i>game</i>	<i>Boo-ate</i>	=	<i>both</i>
	<i>Hee-art</i>	=	<i>heart</i>			

(Baynes, 1861, p.8)

Not only are these found in monosyllables and disyllables, but they are also found in triphthongs, which are usually borrowed lexical items. Let's take a look at the following dialogue:

- (4)
- (a) "Whur bist quaine?"
- (b) "Whoame, to vetch vaythers's quoaat"
- (c) "Mke heeaste, there's a good buoy."

(Baynes, 1861, p. 8)

According to example (4), there are three triphthongs, including *uai* as in *quaine*, *uoa* as in *quoaat*, and *uoy* as in *buoy*. Baynes (1816) further explained that Somerset people add the prefix at the first semi-

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vowel sound of /y/. So, the word *eat* is articulated as *yeat*. The empirical evidence of the first semi-vowel sound of /y/ can be shown in (5).

(5)

Farmer: Shew! –shew! – geet out! – geet out I wish somebody would zateal thic old woman’s dukes! She never gives them nothing to *yeat*, and then comes routing about in the garden, and *yeating* up all bevore ’em.

Farmer: Thic pigs must be turn out o’ the orchard. The wind ha’e blown the apples down, and they be *yeating* away as never before.

(Baynes, 1861, p. 11)

The following examples on the left-hand side are additional examples whereby the phoneme /y/ is inserted, while the examples on the right-hand side are the semi vowel that replaces the aspirated /h/.

<i>Yee-ast</i>	=	<i>east</i>	<i>Yee-ate</i>	=	<i>heat</i>
<i>Yee-art</i>	=	<i>earth</i>	<i>Yee-ard</i>	=	<i>heard</i>
<i>Yee-arly</i>	=	<i>early</i>	<i>Yee-ade</i>	=	<i>head</i>
<i>Yee-arn</i>	=	<i>earn</i>			

(Baynes, 1861, p. 11)

There are several distinctive vowels in RP that make this accent sound prestigious. In RP, the long back vowel /ɑ:/ is used in the word like *dance*. RP’s long vowels are diphthongized, especially the high vowels /i:/ and /u:/. The short ‘o’ vowel that appears in words like *not* and *dog* is pronounced /ɒ/. This short vowel is diphthongized beginning with schwa: /əʊ/ as in ‘s and *boat*.

5. Conclusion

This academic paper has discussed Standard British English and the West Country dialect. These two dialects of English show the dialectal variations with regard to geographical and social aspects. The main difference between standard and non-standard English varieties is related to the level of social acceptability and prestige. This study showed the concept of stigmatization in sociolinguistics and the West Country dialects (Santika, 2016). People are looked down on due to their pronunciation, which deviates from standard English. The people of the West Country are likely to preserve their pronunciation (Blaxter & Coates, 2020), and most British people who dwell in this area are elderly. In terms of phonological aspects, the consonant phonemes in the West Country dialects distinguish themselves from Standard British dialects. One of the outstanding segmental phonological features is the selection differences in terms of voiced qualities in the initial position of words, such as /v/ for /f/ and /d/ for /th/. Speaking Standard British English and RP seems to gain better acceptance in society. The Standard British English is in the higher ranks of social acceptability and prestige. This can be explained from the perspective of the phoneme /r/ and h-dropping accents in the West Country, which can both be stigmatized in England. The disappearance of articulating /r/, such as in ‘far’ and ‘farm’, in Standard British English distinguishes this variety as having non-rhotic accent, interchangeably called r-less. The West Country accents are a regional dialect of r-full accent in a land of r-less accent. This r-full accent in England, where the Standard British English is r-less, shows stigmatization. The h-dropping accent in the West Country dialects can be another reason why the social acceptance and prestige in these dialects gain lower acceptance compared to the RP and Standard British dialects. Finally, no matter what English dialects are spoken, the preservation of these varieties maintains the identity of people in the speech community and indicates to their descendants who they are and where they come from.

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