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Hans Kurath, Linguistic Atlas of the United States. *CSISS Classics*

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Hans Kurath: Linguistic Atlas of the United States By Nina Brown

Background

Hans Kurath (1891–1992)

Hans Kurath, a native of Austria, who immigrated to the United States in 1907, was the leading figure in American geographical linguistics, a field of study dedicated to the identification and mapping of distinctive speech or dialect areas. The inspiration for Kurath's lifelong research came in the 1920s when, as a graduate student in German linguistics at the University of Chicago, he had the opportunity to travel to remote areas of the United States. The many varieties of regional English he encountered during these trips convinced Kurath of the necessity of completing a systematic study of American English. In 1926 he convinced the Modern Language Association to begin planning for the project and in 1931 a pilot study of the New England region was initiated under his direction. It soon became clear, however, that the undertaking was too complex to be completed by a single team of linguists and the project was expanded to eight additional regional operations. Kurath guided the vision and goals of the regional projects for three decades and oversaw the publication of a series of volumes that are known collectively as the *Linguistic Atlas of the United States*.



Courtesy of the University of Michigan Photo Services.

Innovation

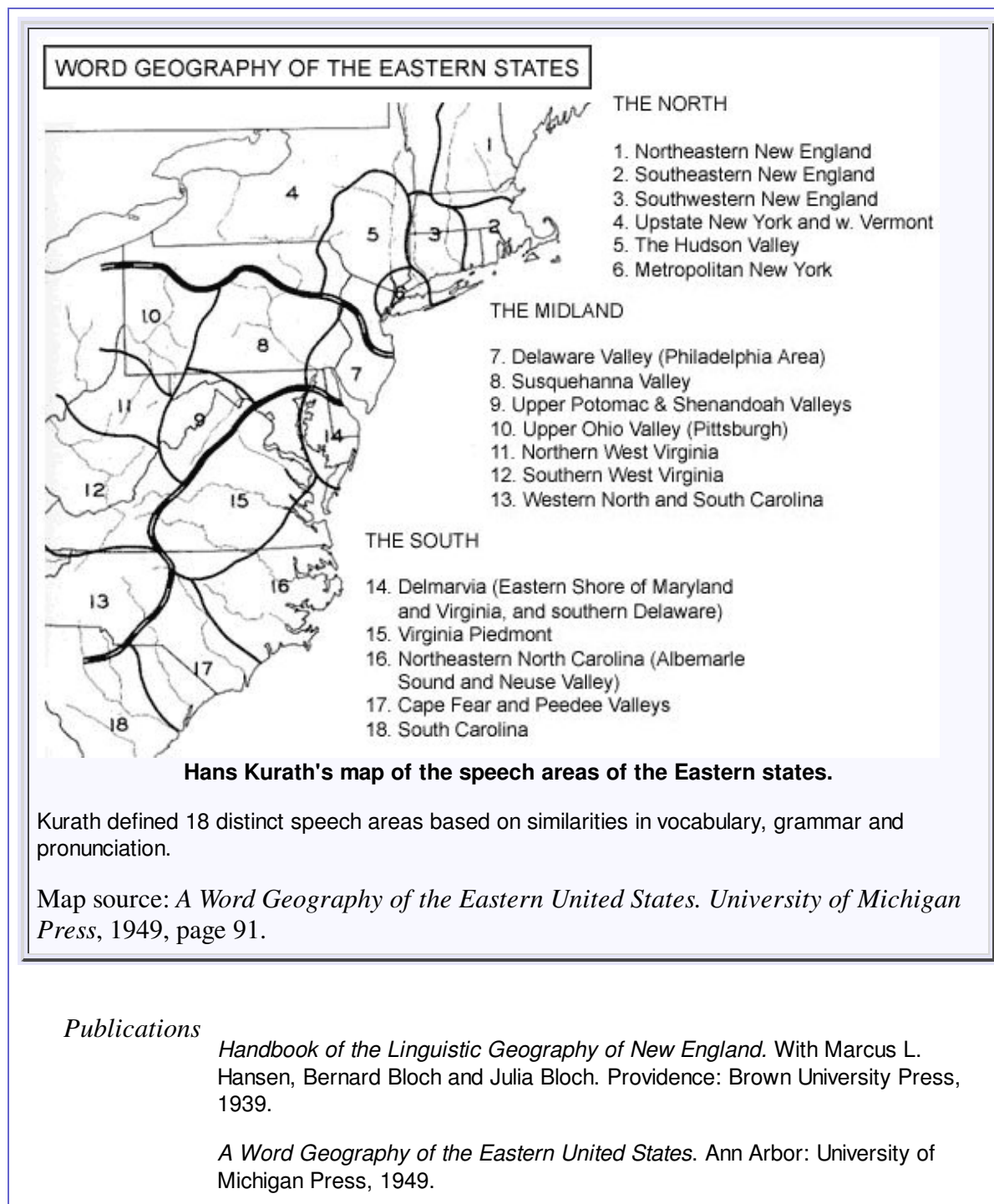
Kurath's chief research interest was historical linguistics and his primary goal was to use the *Linguistic Atlas* to reconstruct the evolution of American English from the relatively "pure" forms of English brought to the United States by early settlers to the regional dialects that existed in the contemporary United States. Kurath was convinced that language held a living record of events like the growth of trade and transport systems, urbanization and population movements.

By plotting regional differences in vocabulary and pronunciation on maps, Kurath and the other researchers were assembling what they hoped was a visual record of the social processes that had transformed American English over the past 200 years.

Each regional operation used similar techniques: a small team of linguists fanned out across the region interviewing at least two people in every county. Kurath gave the researchers explicit instructions about the types of informants who were considered appropriate for the project. In every town or city selected for the project at least two people would be chosen, one had to be "old-fashioned and unschooled," Kurath suggested a farmer or a farmer's wife, and the other should be "a member of the middle class who has had the benefit of a grade-school or high-school education" (Kurath 1949: v). The communities themselves were also carefully screened. Kurath placed a priority on towns that were early American settlements or could be directly linked to them through historical records.

The results of these interviews were plotted on dozens of maps, each showing the distribution of regional vocabularies, pronunciations and forms of grammar. The *Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (1949), for instance, contained maps showing areas in which residents said "stoop" instead of "porch" or "pavement" instead of "sidewalk." The teams also compiled their data into regional and national maps showing the isoglosses, or word boundaries, that delimited distinctive speech areas. The eastern United States alone was divided into eighteen separate speech areas [see illustration].

The Linguistic Atlas of the United States has become a classic resource for linguists and others interested in the English language. Although the initial survey fieldwork for the project has been completed, each region still has a director who continues to supervise the dissemination and analysis of the data and encourage new contributions. As Kurath envisioned, the quantitative and qualitative data in the *Atlas* has provided a foundation for historical analyses. However, the *Atlas* has also figured in more unexpected ways as a reference point in contemporary debates about American English, such as the recent debate about the origin and linguistic significance of "Ebonics," or African American vernacular English (Labov 1995).



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Links

http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/home.html