

**Appalachian English and the Elizabethan English Myth:
A Historical Sociolinguistic Reassessment
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Abstract

The belief that Appalachian English (AppE) preserves substantial elements of Elizabethan or Early Modern English has remained one of the most persistent narratives surrounding the variety. Traditionally associated with the presumed isolation of Appalachian communities, the hypothesis interprets lexical, grammatical, and phonological features perceived as archaic as survivals from Early Modern English. Later scholarship, however, has emphasized migration, dialect contact, and continued linguistic change in the development of AppE (Marckwardt 1958; Montgomery 1989, 1998; Schneider 2003). The hypothesis also has a sociolinguistic dimension: association with “Shakespearean English” has helped reframe a stigmatized variety in terms of historical authenticity and linguistic prestige (Montgomery 1998).

While previous work has largely approached the hypothesis through settlement history, dialect contact, and broader linguistic evidence, this study directly tests its lexical dimension through corpus data. Thirty-two forms identified as “Elizabethan” in Brown (1974), including *nary* ‘not any,’ *hit* for *it*, *blowed* for *blew*, and *learn* ‘teach,’ are compared across the *Audio-Aligned and Parsed Corpus of Appalachian English* (AAPCAppE) and *Early English Books Online* (EEBO). These corpora provide contemporary Appalachian and Early Modern English data, respectively. Because the analysis tests specific historically attributed forms, surface forms were retained rather than lemmatized. Frequency and log-ratio analyses were combined with concordance analysis to evaluate whether apparent correspondences exhibit comparable meanings and functions.

The results provide little evidence for widespread lexical continuity. Only seven of the thirty-two target forms occur in both corpora, while fifteen occur in EEBO but are absent from AAPCAppE. Moreover, none of the seven shared forms exhibits complete continuity of form, frequency, and function. Concordance analysis further shows that formal overlap does not necessarily constitute lexical continuity: *learn*, for example, occurs in AAPCAppE but not with the purported meaning ‘teach,’ while other apparent matches involve unrelated lexical embeddings. Evidence from the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE) further indicates that many target forms are better explained through later regional development, dialect contact, or semantic change.

The findings support historical accounts of AppE as a dynamic contact variety rather than a preserved form of Early Modern English. More broadly, they show how corpus-based historical sociolinguistics can test claims of linguistic continuity while examining how language ideologies of archaism and authenticity become attached to stigmatized regional varieties.

References

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