

Downeast New England and South Boston Dialects

by Juraj Gašpar

Geographical Location



Geographical Location

The Downeast dialect

- coastal Maine
- southern New Hampshire
- working-class Boston north-shore
- eastern Rhode Island

The South Boston dialect

- Boston



The Downeast New England Dialect

Signature sounds

1. In the *lot* and *cloth* lexical sets we hear [ɒ] or [ɑ]. [ɒ] is the older, more traditional vowel and is pronounced half-long [ɒ̯].
rotten, lost jobs, college, swan, waffle, knowledge, off, cough, froth, cross, soft, often, Australia, long, Communist
2. In the *bath* set we most commonly hear long [ɑ:]
bath, pass, card, chance, last, branch, demand, example, half-caste
3. In the *nurse* set we hear [ɜ:], [ɝ] or [ɚ]. The non-rhotic versions are the older, more traditional sounds
bird, curly, furniture, pernicious, certain, earth, herd, rehearsal, work, worst, sermon, turncoat
4. In the *face* set we hear [e:]. The vowel tends to be a single-stage vowel, monophthong rather than diphthong, close and tense in the vicinity of [e]
tape, change, taper, april, gauge, weight, day, rain, great
5. In the *thought* set we hear a variety of sounds in the region, a not very lip-rounded [ɔ] and [ʌ], the best being [ɒə] with a slight offglide
taught, odd, applaud, atom, gob, jaw, chalk, all, bald, hold, alter, fault, awful, naughty, broad, small
6. In the *goat* set we hear [o], a fairly pure single-stage vowel in the vicinity of [u]
soap, road, hole, noble, bowl, soul, cult, role, sow, dough
7. In the *price* set we hear [ʌɪ], the prescriptive GenAm, and [eɪ] or [əɪ] – the most evocative of the traditional dialect
mind, timely, bright-eyed, childlike, bicycle, tight, either, height, fight
8. In the *mouth* set the diphthong's starting point is a more central or back vowel than in GenAm. The sound is [eʊ], perhaps with lip rounding in most speakers
out, load, known, count, flower, crowd, dowry, bow, McLeod
9. In the *near, square, cure* and *letter* sets pronunciations are quite variable, the important feature is the lack of r-coloration (non-rhotic)
beer, here, peer, we're, fear, care, air, bear, heir, pour, you're, letter, father, perhaps
10. In the *start* set we hear [ɑ:] (traditional, long, lacking rhoticity), [ɑ]
far away, marksman, car park, Harward Yard, heart, sergeant, sparkling
11. In the *north, force* sets the significant feature is non-rhoticity, though variable. The vowel is more open and less round than in GenAm. Pronounced [ɒə]
for, war, distort, orb, form, purpose, orbit, normal, ore, bore, floor, four, deport

The Downeast New England Dialect

Additional features

1. Final *-ing* often reduced -> [ɪn]

fightin'

2. Intrusive *r*

Cuba is, China and Japan, idea of it

often heard even when the word is followed by
silence

idear

3. Final unstressed *-y* and *-ey* endings are pronounced more laxly -> [ɪ]: party ['pɑ:ɾɪ], forty ['fo:ɾɪ]

4. Vowel following medial [t] or [ʔ] is retained. *Britain* ['brɪtn], *certain* ['sɜ:tn] -> ['brɪʔen], ['sɜ:ʔen]

The South Boston Dialect

Signature sounds

1. In the *marry* lexical subset of *trap* we hear [æ]
marry, Paris, arrow, carriage, maritime, parapet
2. In the *lot* and *cloth* lexical set we hear a less rounded [ɒ]
stop, rob, Tom, profit, honest, swan, waffle, knowledge, off, cough, froth
3. In the *bath* lexical set we hear [a] (in Boston Brahmin) or [æ] (more likely in Southie)
staff, path, brass, class, blast, ask, after, master, basket, fasten, laugh, dance
4. In the *nurse* lexical set we hear [ɜ] or [ɝ]. Here Boston brahmin speakers tend to be non-rhotic; in some Southie speakers r-colouration is sometimes replaced with lip rounding
usurp, burn, assert, verb, term, certain, rehearsal, work, early, bird, worm
5. In the *palm* lexical set we hear [a]. Southie speakers thus make homonyms of *father* and *farther*
calm, father, bra, spa, cantata, bravado, candelabra, gala, gunner
6. In the *thought* lexical set we hear a less rounded [ɒ]
naughty, applaud, autumn, jaw, chalk, bald, hold, altar, fault
7. In the *mouth* lexical set we hear [eʊ] starting with a more central vowel
load, known, flower, crowd, dowry, vow, McLeod, power, tower
8. South Boston is erratically non-rhotic in vowel+r sounds in *near, square, cure* and *letter* sets except for *nurse* set(#4)
square, beer, here, serious, very, canary, you're, tourist, curious, harder
9. In the *start* lexical set we hear long [a:], a front vowel. May be one of the most conspicuous Southie and Boston signature sounds.
far, bizarre, farm, party, park, car, Harvard, yard, sorry, safari, area, Sahara, tiara
10. In the *north/force* lexical set we hear a less rounded [ɒə]
far, war, farm, purpose, normal, Laura, flaw, bore, afford, bomb, potent, cause, glorious

The South Boston Dialect

Additional features:

1. Intrusive and linking *r*

Cuba is, China and Japan, idea of it

often heard even when the word is followed by silence

idear

2. *With* pronounced [wit^ɪ] with no audible release

3. No elision of *t* in sentimental, sentence

4. In the *hurry* lexical subset of *strut* we hear [ʌ] instead of [ɜ]

5. Consonant *r* is sometimes labialized: [v] or [ɹ^w]

Theresa, brains, try, instruct

6. Very occasionally [h] or voiced [ɦ] is used to start a vowel-initial word: *underwear*

[ɦʌndəweɪə]

7. The addition of [n] to *out* and *outside*: [eʊntsaid] and the use of [t] for [d] in *wicked*:

[wikɪt]

8. Reduction of the definite article, sometimes almost to zero; as in *I'm going down ~~the~~ cellar.*

Audio and video samples

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbK4cL3QSc0>
(Boston accent)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtR68AvwrCw&feature=related> (a relaxed-sounding Boston woman)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaMmYnIfrXk&feature=related> [Boston(Downeast NE) accent lessons]
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=WYefY4nn78Y> (Southies talking)
- <http://www.paulmeier.com/TESTS/SouthBostonTestAnswers.mp3> (South Boston accent)
- <http://www.paulmeier.com/TESTS/DowneastTestAnswers.mp3> (Downeast New England accent)

Sources

- Meier, Paul. "The Downeast New England Dialect." *Accents and Dialects for Stage and Screen*. 2007. CD-ROM.
- Meier, Paul. "The South Boston Dialect." *Accents and Dialects for Stage and Screen*. 2007. CD-ROM.

Thank you for your attention