

## Do You Speak American?

### Video Guide 1

(video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcx7khaN180>)

- A. In the first part of his journey to trace the development of American English(es)<sup>1</sup>, Robert McNeil visits South Freeport, Maine. He argues that this region's particular accent is dying out. Based on the information suggested by McNeil's interviewee, speculate which could be one of the social factors contributing to this apparent decline.
- B. The speech patterns of South Freeport are related to another dialect spoken in a large city in Massachusetts. Which city is that? Unlike Freeport's variety, this dialect is far from fading away. Which could be the reasons for its vitality?
- C. Listen to McNeil's speech patterns carefully? Does he sound Canadian? He claims that he had to change his 'accent' because he wanted to become an actor? If you think he really seems to have achieved a more standard pronunciation, to what do you attribute his success?
- D. When McNeil visits New York, he meets two very dissimilar individuals: John Simon (theater critic) and Jesse Sheidlower (lexicographer). They represent two classic points of view about language. In the chart below, enter information that could serve to describe the main tenets of these two approaches to language evaluation. Also, add some details about the prescriptivists' opinion about the descriptivist stance, and vice versa.

| <i>Prescriptivism</i> | <i>Descriptivism</i> |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
|                       |                      |

---

<sup>1</sup> Although it is considered ungrammatical to pluralize a noun that stands for a language (as an uncountable noun), nowadays most linguists use the form "Englishes" to refer to the diverse varieties of the language. For example, we employ the term World Englishes to refer to those dialects that are used as an official communication tool in countries such as India, Ghana or Malaysia.

- E. Why are white teenage boys attracted to African-American culture and language, according to Cece Cutler?
  
- F. Following William Labov's explanation, say which type of pronunciation was considered as the most desirable one before WWII. Which famous politician was notably associated with this accent? Why do Americans now reject the r-less British pronunciation even if they consider it quite proper?
  
- G. Preston explains Americans' opinions about their language as the result of a tension between insecurity and populism. Elaborate on this in your own words. What does Preston study? How does he do it? Use examples shown on the video.
  
- H. In Barbara Johnstone's opinion, what's the connection between language and identity in Pittsburgh?
  
- I. How should a broadcaster sound like? According to this video, where is the 'most correct' American English spoken? Which city is especially connected to this sort of 'accentless' English? In your opinion, is there any other American variety that could be considered as the norm?