

# Folk dialectology at the top of the world

## Alaskan views of English in North America and Alaska

Clare Dannenberg  
 cjdannenberg@alaska.edu

David Bowie  
 david.bowie@alaska.edu  
 Twitter @sociolk



Alaska is positioned at an extreme corner of North American English.

Does the resulting relative isolation result in Alaskans' perceptions of dialect regions being different from what is found elsewhere?

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### The mapping tasks

Respondents completed one of two folk dialectology tasks. One was a simple map-drawing task, in which they were given an unlabeled outline map of North America and asked to draw boundaries for areas where people speak in different ways; this was then followed by the same task, using an unlabeled outline map of Alaska. In both cases, they were told to limit their responses to the way English is spoken.

The second task involved direct elicitation of measures (along a 6-point Likert scale) of linguistic similarity, correctness, and so on, as well as social measures such as friendliness and intelligence, at a national level (for all 50 states, New York City, and Washington DC) and for Alaska (by county-equivalent).

Usable results at a national scale were obtained from 47 Alaskans for the map-drawing task and 43 Alaskans for the direct elicitation task; analysis at the level of Alaska were limited to respondents from Anchorage, giving 35 for the map-drawing task and 27 for direct elicitation.

### Alaska and its geography



Alaska is the most northwestern of the United States (the darker area in the map above left), sharing a land border with British Columbia and Yukon, but not with any other US states. It is by far the largest of the states (clearly shown in the map above right, where Alaska is superimposed on the contiguous United States, with both at the same scale). Despite its size, it has a relatively low population (710,231 in 2010), and thus the lowest population density of any state. Alaska's geography is largely rural, but 41.1% of the state's population lives in the Municipality of Anchorage, in the state's south-central region.



Particularly noteworthy is the fact that about one-third of the state's population lives in areas inaccessible by road (as can be seen in the map above left, which shows cities and Census-designated places along with the state's intercity road system), and it is the largely Native Alaskan areas of the state that aren't on the road system (shown in the map above right, where the darker the green, the higher that county-equivalent's proportion of the population that is Alaska Native).

### Further information & acknowledgments

Data for this analysis is drawn from the larger ongoing *Talking Anchorage* project, which is described in more detail at the website linked to by the QR code to the right. *Talking Anchorage* investigates the negotiation of identity in urban Alaska and has, so far, collected more than 70 interviews from over 100 long-term Anchorage residents in "StoryCorps" style—that is, where participants are invited to talk on specific topics with limited interruption from the interviewer, along with some formal elicitation tasks.



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### Anchorageites' perceptions of Alaska

In the map-drawing task, Anchorageites took four main approaches to labeling dialect regions within the state:

- Urban vs. rural (34.3%)
  - Urban areas always include Anchorage
  - Sometimes urban is labeled *normal*, rural as *Native*



- One undifferentiated mass (14.3%)
  - Sometimes described as some sort of standard
  - Often explicitly labeled *normal*



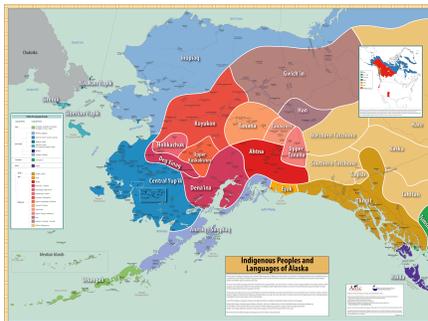
- Grouping by Alaska Native region (17.1%)
  - Only includes maps that explicitly name Native groups
  - Most common: Yup'ik, Athabaskan, Inupiat, Tlingit
  - Anchorage and Fairbanks sometimes given as exceptions



- Directional (e.g., *northern*, *interior*) descriptors (20.0%)

### A possible inspiration?

The map below shows Alaska Native linguistic regions ca. 1900, and was co-produced by the Alaska Native Language Center and the Institute of Social and Economic Research and originally released in 1974. It is widely distributed throughout Alaska, and has enough commonalities with maps drawn by individuals who used Alaska Native regions as labels that we suspect it may have served as an inspiration for that approach.



### Alaskans and the bounds of the linguistic South

Alaskans frequently separate out Alaska (shown in 74.5% of the maps, sometimes labeled *normal*) and Canada, as might be expected given geographic proximity, but the South was identified as a dialect region by more Alaskans (83.0%) than any other. Two hand-drawn maps including the South are shown below; the one on the right shows the one that included the most area in this region, but there were others that extended the South to the west coast.



Of course, whether any Alaskans *actually* think San Francisco is part of the linguistic South is doubtful, particularly given the emergence of a coherent South (one that includes Texas but not Florida) in the direct-elicitation task, as can be seen in the maps below, where the one on the left shows ratings of correctness and the one on the right, for comparison, shows similarity to the rater's own speech. (Darker colors are, respectively, more correct and more similar.)

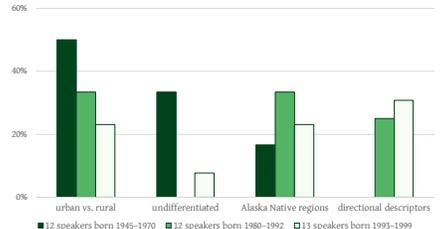


(Note the high degree of linguistic security among Alaskans.)

It seems that the very expansive South in the hand-drawn maps may simply be the result of a lack of knowledge of geography. (Confirming this will require further study, perhaps using a map with cities labeled.)

### Possible trends over (apparent) time

Dividing the respondents who drew maps of Alaska into similarly-sized groups shows some intriguing possibilities into the ways speakers' categorizations of Alaskan Englishes *may* have changed over time.



In addition, directly comparing older and younger Alaskans who completed the direct-elicitation task gives a number of statistically significant differences (though only small- to medium-sized effects), where younger speakers...

- ...distinguish more strongly between "core" Southern states and those at the borders of the region
- ...are more likely to rate Hawai'ian English as "standard"
- ...are more likely to rate New England English positively
- ...are more likely to rate Midwestern English negatively (except for Michigan, which moves the other direction)

Interestingly, Alaskans' ratings of Alaska English were both positive and stable among raters of all ages.

Of course, it is unclear at this point whether these are the result of generational change, age grading, or something completely else. They do point in interesting directions for future investigation, however.