

Alaskans' perception of North American dialects of English

UAA Research & Creative Activity Showcase

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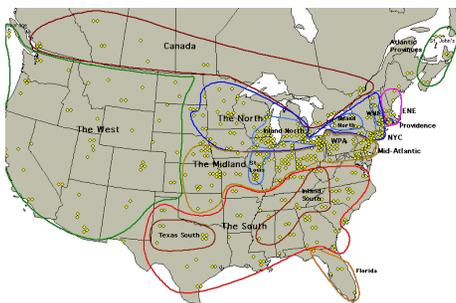
Every English speaker holds a map of dialects of the language in their minds.
So: What do Alaskans think about English here and elsewhere?



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Dialectology

Linguists have been exploring regional differences in language since at least the 1870s, and in the United States since at least the 1920s. These have generally focused on the differences in the production of language, resulting in maps showing regional variation.



North American dialects in production (source: Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006)

Perceptual dialectology

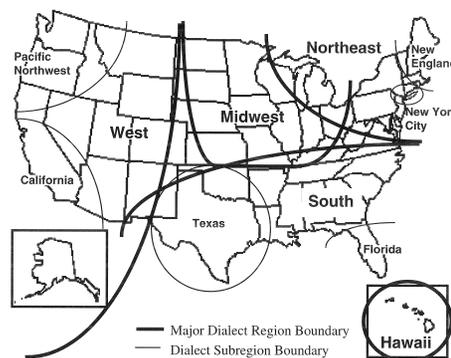
However, linguistic *production* is only one side of the equation. Just as important, particularly if we're interested in the realities of the way people understand the world around them, is the *perception* of different dialects.

This is particularly crucial given that dialectologists can clearly demonstrate that everyone has an accent, but only some people perceive themselves as having one. (So, for example, speakers from the Pacific Northwest regularly self-report having no accent, while individuals from the Deep South say they do—but from a linguistic point of view, not only do they both have an accent, they both have an accent to the same degree, just differing in what the distinctive features are.

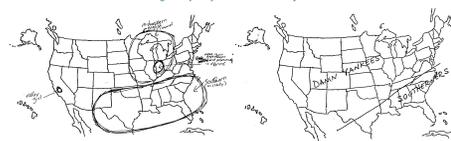
This issue has been studied by Japanese linguists since at least the 1920s and Dutch linguists since at least the 1930s, but was not seriously looked at in the United States until the 1980s.

Perceptual Maps of the United States

Work on perceptual dialectology in the Lower 48 has found that the most salient gradient is regional, primarily North-South and secondarily East-West.



Major Dialect Region Boundary
Dialect Subregion Boundary
Oregonian perceptions (source: Hartley 1999)



Examples of Michiganian (left) and South Carolinian (right) perceptions (source: Preston 1996)

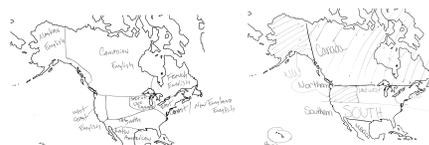
But what about Alaska?

Perceptions of Alaska: Perceptions of Alaskan (and to a lesser extent Hawai'i'an) Englishes aren't very well understood, in great part because the location of Alaska (and again, to a lesser extent Hawai'i) isn't given accurately on the maps that have been drawn by respondents from the Lower 48.

Perceptions by Alaskans: Every study of perceptual dialectology in the United States has surveyed respondents from the Lower 48, with no representation from Alaskans at all. As a result, we don't have any idea where Alaskans believe the various dialect regions of English in the United States are.

What Alaskans Think of the North America

Our study of Alaskans' perceptions of dialects of English across North America is still in its very early stages, but initial results point to a very strong North-South division with a secondary East-West division, just like the perceptions of individuals from other parts of the United States. Intriguingly, though, Alaskans' perceptions of the linguistic South appear to be quite a bit more expansive than those of non-Alaskans.



Examples of Alaskan perceptions of North American Englishes

What Alaskans Think of Alaska

How Alaskans think of Alaska, however, is different: Alaskans tend to view Alaskan dialects of English along ethnic lines. This is unlike any other region of the United States studied for local perceptions to this point. (Some Alaskans also seem to have a secondary urban-rural distinction, which has been found elsewhere.)

Crucially: Alaskans categorize Alaskan Englishes more finely than North American Englishes generally (which is not surprising), while categorizing Alaskan Englishes along a different dimension (which is).



Example of Alaskan perceptions of Alaskan Englishes

Questions Remaining

This study has just begun, and so there are, of course, a lot of questions remaining. Some of the big ones include:

Are there regional differences in perception across Alaska? So far, the vast majority of our Alaskan responses have come from Anchorage residents, most of whom have grown up in the Anchorage Metropolitan Statistical Area. This makes sense—we are located in Anchorage, we haven't made an effort to systematically sample the population yet, and the area is home to a large percentage of Alaska's population. We do wonder, however, if individuals from rural areas might divide the state differently.

Does increased exposure to non-Alaskan dialects change perceptions of the Lower 48? Given findings from others' studies in the Lower 48 we suspect that it wouldn't have much of an effect, but it may have an effect at the margins. Specifically, we might expect that those with more exposure to Lower 48 dialects may produce maps that more closely match linguistic realities, by including, e.g., Southern California in the linguistic West rather than the linguistic South.

Are there social correlates with perceptions of dialect boundaries? We don't have enough of a sample to be able to hazard a guess on whether in Alaska, say, men and women draw different dialect boundaries, whether there is a correlation between social class and how linguistic borders are perceived, or even, most importantly given our early findings, whether individuals of different ethnicities categorize dialects differently.

A Selected Bibliography on Dialect Perception

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