

Perceptual Dialectology: Northerners and Southerners' View of Different American Dialects

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ABSTRACT

American English, also known as US English, is a set of dialects in the English language mostly used in the United States. It has considerable variations in terminology, phrasing and syntax. The differences are mostly on regional basis. The three major regional dialects are: Northern, Midland, and Southern. Generally, dialect varieties are acceptable in society; however, some of them are more stigmatized than others. The present study has been done to examine American English speakers' perceptions towards regional American varieties in terms of correctness, pleasantness, and difference from their own speech.

Keywords: Perceptual dialectology; dialects; American English

INTRODUCTION

Teachers of English from countries where English is a second language might have encountered a dilemma of what English should be taught in their classrooms. With the growing World Englishes concept, curriculum everywhere is open to the teaching of different dialects and accents. American English shows significant variations in terms of terminology, phrasing and syntax other than the Standard English. The distinctiveness of different dialects in American English has been a topic of interest for at least 100 years and led to the creation of various dictionaries distinguishing the differences between the dialects. American English is rich of dialects, with numerous sub-varieties, such as Ebonics, Chicano, and AAE, which manifest their own fascinating uniqueness. Many of the dialects are the results of influences from other languages and cultures that have played – and/or continue to play – a significant role in the US history. This phenomenon tells us that the language is constantly developing, and that new words and constructs arise every day in Americans' use of English (Preston, 2003).

Traditionally, Standard American English is distinguished into three main regional dialects, each of which has several sub-dialects. The Northern (or New England) dialect is spoken in New England and New York State; one of its sub-dialects is the “New

Yorkese” of New York City. The Midland (or General American) dialect is heard along the coast from New Jersey to Delaware, with variants spoken in an area bound by the Upper Ohio Valley, West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and eastern Tennessee. The Southern dialect, with its varieties, is spoken from Delaware to South Carolina. From their respective focal points, these dialects have spread and mingled across the rest of the country (Clopper, Levi & Pisoni, 2005).

The present study has been done to examine the various dialects of American English. It was conducted in Athens, Ohio, and four dialects of different regions were studied on correctness, pleasantness and similarities. The four dialects are those heard in New York City, Ohio, Texas and Louisiana. According to Wolfram and Ward (2006), these taken four dialects significantly vary from each other and are differently perceived by listeners in terms of accentedness, steadiness, and professional attractiveness. The interest of the study was not only in determining the more general perceptual dialect areas but also in investigating native speaker perception towards the taken four regional dialects.

The first dialect examined is the “New Yorkese” from New York City (NYC) as part of Northern dialect. Unlike most other urban dialects, the NYC dialect stands by itself and bears little resemblance to the

other dialects in its region. It is also the most disliked and parodied of any American dialects. The second dialect is Ohio dialect from the Midwest. As the center of the linguistic norm, it is considered to be the official dialect of the people of the United States.

Next, the Texas dialect from Western United States has many words which originally came from Spanish, cowboy jargon, and even some from the languages of the Native Americans. Compared to the Eastern United States, the Western regions were settled too recently for very distinctive dialects to have time to develop, and that adds to their unique characteristics. Lastly, the Louisiana dialects which many people in southern Louisiana will speak in two or three of these dialects: Cajun French, Cajun English, Yat (resembles to NYC dialect), and Louisiana French Creole.

The chief purpose to study these dialects was to investigate American English speakers' perceptions about American dialects in terms of correctness, pleasantness, and difference from their own speech. Reduplicating Kuiper's (2005) study, the present study utilizes quantitative analysis of selected dialect features and a perceptual mapping task in order to determine whether perceptions match linguistic reality.

PERCEPTUAL DIALECTOLOGY

The existence of different dialects of a language and how the regional patterns of dialect production are categorized have been documented through the history and development of regional dialectology. Preston (1989) introduced the concept of perceptual dialectology or folk dialectology as one of the approaches that helped provide a subjective viewpoint towards the understanding and interpreting differences among regional dialects. He combined a variety of studies on dialectology, which was also paving the way for many upcoming studies on the same field conducted by researchers of English and of different languages for the last two decades. Preston (1999) and Long and Preston (2002) provided additional contributions to the field with historical, regional, methodological and interpretive surveys conducted for the studies taken place not only in some English speaking countries (Canada, the United States), but also in several countries where other languages are spoken namely Japan, the Netherlands, Cuba, Hungary, Italy, Korea, and Mali.

The purpose of perceptual dialectology is to determine how people perceive the differences between their own dialects and other language varieties; or in other words, to find out about people's

'mental dialect maps'. The methods used in perceptual dialectology involve calling upon participants, having them intuitively draw lines on a (blank) map and/or label or rank different regional dialect areas according to a pre-designed scale (e.g., Likert scale).

Kuiper (2005) examined the perceptions of French speakers in the two regions: Ile de France (Paris) and Provence towards regional French dialects and explored the relation between those perceptions and linguistic security. Participants of the study were asked to use the Likert scales to rate regional French varieties according to three categories: correctness, pleasantness and difference from their own dialects. Woehrling and Boula de Mareuil (2006) in their study aimed at discovering how accents had an effect on the perceptual identification of French varieties and how they related to the age of the speakers.

In the field of perceptual dialectology, up to the time of this paper, the number of studies on English perceptual dialectology has apparently outnumbered the perceptual dialectology studies on other languages. Regarding the study of perceptual dialectology of English, Pearce (2009) presented a finding drawn from a questionnaire responded by approximately 1,600 participants in North East England. The study employed Preston's method which included providing names of a selected set of areas, asking participants to numerically rate the regional varieties in each area according to the similarities and differences, and asking for participants' comments and opinions on the dialects used in the rated areas.

As for perceptual dialectology on American English, following the steps of various preceding books, experiments and articles, some of the most recent studies can be named as follows: Preston (2000); Clopper and Pisoni (2003); Clopper, Levi, and Pisoni (2005); Bucholtz, Bermudez, Fung, Edwards, and Vargas (2008); Bucholtz, Bermudez, Fung, Edwards, Vargas (2007); and Blake, Erker, and Taylor (2009).

The general purpose of the majority of studies on American English perceptual dialectology including those listed above is to shed light on and/or provide a better and more profound understanding about how people from different regions in the United States perceive their own speech in comparison with the speech used by others. As Preston (2000) put it:

"The belief that some varieties of a language are not as good as others runs so deep that one might say it is the major preoccupation of Americans with their language. It is a belief nearly

universally attached to minorities, rural people, and the less well-educated people, and it extends even to well-educated speakers of some regional varieties. Evidence for this belief comes from what real people, not professional linguists, believe about language variety.” (p.1)

The studies, regardless of the states they concern, generally gear towards the objective of gaining a closer insight into the common belief that some varieties of American English are better than others, and the result we know of to date, as concluded by Preston (2000), is that among a number of varieties of American English, the dialects spoken in New York City and the South received the least preference from respondents.

However, as the result of globalization, the geographical as well as the mental mapping of regional dialects might experience changes and even become more challenging to classify. Therefore, continual research and reduplicative studies in the field are really in need.

METHOD

To achieve the purpose of this research, the data were collected through questionnaires and perceptual mapping. The questionnaires were divided into three different sections; degree of difference, degree of correctness, and degree of pleasantness. As the study focused on four different American dialects, respondents were asked to rate dialects of Ohio, New York City, Louisiana, and Texas (See Appendix).

Each item on the survey was evaluated by using a Likert scale from 1 to 5. In determining the degree of difference of the four dialects, number 1 is for one they consider resembles their own dialects, and 5 is for the most incomprehensible dialect. In the second part of the survey, number 1 reflects the dialect that is not all correct, while number 5 is for the most correct dialect of American English. Similarly, in the third part of the survey, number 1 is used to describe dialect that is not at all pleasant, and 5 is for the most pleasant one to hear.

Table 2. Rank Order of Means for Northerners and Southerners Degree of Difference Ratings

	North			South		
	Dialect	Mean	Std. Deviation	Dialects	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Ohio	1.53	0.640	Ohio	2.33	0.816
2	New York City	2.40	0.737	Louisiana	3.33	0.816
3	Texas	3.00	0.756	Texas	3.5	1.517
4	Louisiana	3.33	0.900	New York City	3.83	0.983

After filling out the survey, the respondents were asked to give label or classify dialects in a blank map of America.

The Respondents

The participants of the research were twenty-one Ohio University students ranging between the ages of 18 to 32. Fifteen respondents came from states that we categorized as part of the North, and six of them were from Southern areas. We divided the respondents into two different regions, North and South, as we wanted to compare how people from both regions perceive each other's dialects. There was a respondent who identified herself to be from California, a state in the Western part of the United States. After some careful considerations, we decided to put her among Southern respondents.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Degree of Difference

The first focus of the analysis is degree of difference by analyzing which dialects were perceived to be closely resembling the respondents' own dialects. The table below presents the quantitative data related to degree of difference drawn from the questionnaire.

The results show that the dialect spoken in Ohio was viewed as closest to their own dialects by both Northerners and Southerners, however, the mean values shows that the northerners rated Ohio as closer than the Southerners dido.

Table 1. The Northerner and Southerner Respondents

No	Northern respondents	Number	Southern respondents	Number
1	Ohio	11	Tennessee	1
2	Indiana	1	Oklahoma	1
3	New York City	1	California	1
4	New Hampshire	1	South Carolina	1
5	Pittsburg	1	Georgia	1
6			Kentucky	1
Total		15		6

The Northern and Southern dialect division can be seen in the order of dialects rated as the most different from their own dialects. The northerners put the two cities in the North as the closest, followed by the two cities in the South. The southerners, on the contrary, put New York, a city in the North as the most different, while Ohio, despite its being a city in the North, is considered to resemble their dialect the closest. It might be related to the general notion that Ohio English is the most standard and correct English in America. The data suggested that the southern respondents thought their dialects were closer to the standard Ohio English rather than the stigmatized dialects of Texas or Louisiana.

Another thing to notice is that the standard derivation of the southerners' rating on Louisiana was quite high. It was more than 1.5, which indicates that the southern survey-takers might have quite different opinions on this.

Degree of Correctness

Next, the second focus of the analysis is degree of correctness. It attempted at identifying which dialects were perceived to be most correct according to the respondents. The table below illustrates the quantitative data related to degree of correctness drawn from the questionnaire.

Table 3. Rank Order of Means for Northerners and Southerners Degree of Correctness Ratings

	North		South		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	
1 Ohio	3.80	1.146	Ohio	4.33	0.816
2 New York City	3.60	1.121	New York City	3.17	1.472
3 Texas	3.33	1.047	Texas	2.67	1.506
4 Louisiana	3.07	1.100	Louisiana	2.50	1.049

The result shows that both Northerners and Southerners rated Ohio very highly in terms of correctness. The mean of Ohio dialect from Northerners' perspective is 3.80, followed by New York, Texas, and Louisiana. Interestingly, the Southerner respondents also showed the same ranking order for the dialects; however, the mean for Ohio was higher, 4.33. Overall, the table concludes that compared to the Northerners, the Southerners rated Ohio dialect very high, but they rated other dialects lower.

This perspective seems to be closely related to the fact that Ohio is part of the Midwest area, in which its dialect has been used as the standard dialect in American media. This dialect turned out to be the

most favorable one because people heard it throughout television most of the time; therefore, they tend to think that it is the most correct or standard one. Louisiana dialect, on the other side, appears to be the most stigmatized regional one. Both groups of respondents rated it very low, 3.07 and 2.50. The dialects of Texas and Louisiana, which are those from the South, were at the bottom two. This was related to the stigma that had been received by the Southerners. One thing that surprised us was that the Southerners also rated their own dialects very low, even lower than Northerners. For example, when the Northerners gave Texas 3.33, the Southerners gave the same dialect only 2.67. The concept of linguistic insecurity may best explain this fact. Southerners are convinced that their dialects are not correct; the general view about their dialects has somehow shaped the way they perceived themselves.

Degree of Pleasantness

Lastly, the study focuses on degree of pleasantness by analyzing which dialects were perceived to be most agreeable or most pleasant to hear by the respondents. The table below presents the quantitative data related to degree of pleasantness drawn from the questionnaire.

Table 3. Rank Order of Means for Northerners and Southerners Degree of Pleasantness Ratings

	North		South		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	
1 Louisiana	3.73	0.799	Louisiana	3.33	1.033
2 Ohio	3.60	1.183	Ohio	2.83	1.169
3 Texas	3.33	1.113	Texas	2.83	1.169
4 New York City	3.13	1.356	New York City	2.00	0.894

The result of the survey shows that the Northerners considered that Louisiana dialect was the most pleasant dialect compared to the other three. The Northerner respondents gave 3.73 to Louisiana, and put it in the top of the ranking. The Southerners also thought that Louisiana dialect was the most pleasant dialect, followed by Ohio, Texas, and New York dialects. Therefore, there was no significant difference in the way the Northerners and the Southerners perceive the most pleasant dialect.

However, it is interesting to look at how a dialect that was rated the lowest in terms of correctness was considered to be the most pleasant. The same phenomenon was also reflected in the study conducted by Kuiper (2005), in which Parisian speakers believed they spoke pleasant and correct French while Provençal speakers were convinced that

the French they were speaking were less correct despite the most pleasant one. In our study, the Southerners might suffer from linguistic insecurity, as their dialects were not among the favorable ones; therefore, they tried to compensate their being less correct by rating their dialect high in terms of pleasantness. However, some unexpected findings showed that the Northerners also thought that Louisiana had more pleasant dialect than Ohio. Louisiana dialect might sound very different for them; that is why, they thought it sounded unique and nicer than their own dialects.

The result also shows that New York City was rated very low in terms of pleasantness. This is in line with common notion mentioning that New York City is the most parodied American dialect.

PERCEPTUAL MAPPING

In our study, we also asked the respondents to draw maps of dialects in a blank map of America that we presented to them. Figure 1 and 2 below represent different maps drawn by respondents from the North and the South. From the maps, we could conclude



Figure 1. Perceptual Map Drawn by a Northerner Respondent

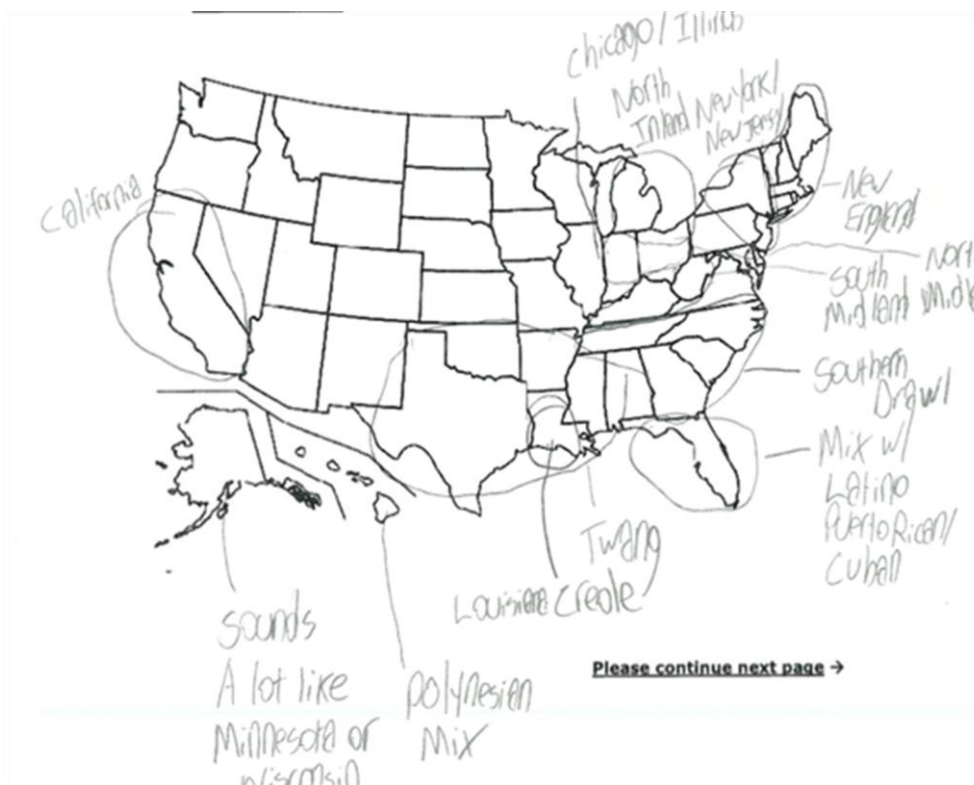


Figure 2. Perceptual Map Drawn by a Southerner Respondent

that both respondents seemed to be familiar with dialect division of the states in the Eastern part of the map.

However, when it came to states in the middle part and Western part of the map, most of them felt unfamiliar and decided to leave the maps blank. This might be related to the fact that our respondents were people from the North and the South, and only one of them from the West. The Northerners and the Southerners were probably more familiar with the dialects around them, as they seemed to be more confident in labeling and classifying dialect varieties in the Eastern part of the map.

CONCLUSION

One of the most interesting findings from the survey analysis is that Louisiana dialect was rated as the least correct one, yet both the Northerner and Southerner group considered it as the most pleasant dialect. Further, there might be different reasons concerning the Northerners and the Southerners' point of view. In degrees of difference, the Northerner group rated Louisiana to be the least similar, while the Southerner group rated it the second similar dialect. Our result is very much like Preston's (2000). It is safe to conclude that the Southerners generally are linguistically insecure; nevertheless, further interviews with the respondents need to be done to get more information. As to the way the Northerner group rated Louisiana, the only explanation that we can give is their preference of different or even exotic accents in terms of pleasantness. In terms of degree of difference, the Northerner group and the Southerner group rated differently; however, they rated similarly in degree of correctness and pleasantness. This reveals that both groups understood the differences between the northern and southern dialects, but there is no significant difference in their subjective perception of the dialects.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study only involved 21 respondents; thus, future research within the same scope can aim to more respondents. Another concern is related to the subject distribution. The number of Northerner respondents in our study was more than that of the Southerner respondents. There were fifteen respondents from the North and six respondents from the South. In the future, a more balanced number of respondents from both groups can support the objectivity and reliability of the study. Future researchers can also consider including all the fifty states in the US for a more comprehensive research, as well as using taped

interview method in order to provide more subjective view from the respondents.

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APPENDIX.

The Questionnaire

The degree of difference questionnaire

After each region, circle the number. Each number expresses:

1. If you think the English spoken in that region resembles your own
2. If you think the English spoken in that region slightly differs from your own
3. If there is a resemblance, but weaker
4. If the English in that region scarcely resembles the English you speak
5. If the English in that region is incomprehensible to you

1. New York	1	2	3	4	5
2. Ohio	1	2	3	4	5
3. Texas	1	2	3	4	5
4. Louisiana	1	2	3	4	5

The degree of correctness questionnaire

After each of the regions given below, circle the appropriate number (from 1 to 5) according to you, using the following scale:

1. They speak an English in that region that is not at all correct
5. They speak an English in that region that is completely correct.

1. New York	1	2	3	4	5
2. Ohio	1	2	3	4	5
3. Texas	1	2	3	4	5
4. Louisiana	1	2	3	4	5

The degree of pleasantness questionnaire

After each of the regions given below, circle the appropriate number (from 1 to 5) according to you, using the following scale:

1. They speak an English in that region that is not at all pleasant
5. They speak an English in that region that is completely pleasant.

1. New York	1	2	3	4	5
2. Ohio	1	2	3	4	5
3. Texas	1	2	3	4	5
4. Louisiana	1	2	3	4	5

Please draw the map of American dialects as you perceive them.



Adapted from Kuiper (2005).