Linguistic and non-linguistic regions in perceptual dialectology

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Perceptual dialectology: where do non-linguists believe dialect regions are located?

A common methodology: have naïve informants draw maps of dialect boundaries (e.g., Evans 2011, Bucholz et al. 2007, Inoue 1996, Preston 1986, and many others). Most non-linguist informants don’t actually know where dialect boundaries are located; some regions on hand-drawn dialect maps correspond fairly well to linguistic reality, but others bear no particular resemblance to any known empirical dialect regions. If people don’t know where actual dialect boundaries are, where do they get their ideas?

Inoue (1996) finds “commonly used areal divisions” on “ordinary geographical maps” and “stereotypical… geographic labels” correspond to hand-drawn dialect maps. Evans (2011) finds “respondents regularly perceive eastern Washington [state] as different”, matching a “perceived cultural divide” between two halves of the state.

Question for this pilot study: Are people’s beliefs about where regions with distinctive speech are shaped or determined by regions being culturally or geographically salient for other reasons?

Methodology:

Two map-drawing tasks carried out (in this order) in two regions in New York State.

1) On an outline map of New York State (with a few cities labeled to help orient), draw and label the major sub-regions of New York State.

2) On another copy of the same map, draw and label regions that you think have distinctive ways of speaking.

Maps collected in summer 2008 in the course of fieldwork reported in Dinkin (2009):

- 14 respondents from **Northern New York** (NNY): Ogdensburg and Canton
- 20 respondents from **Central New York** (CNY): Sidney, Oneonta, Cooperstown — two of whom only completed one map task, so there are 19 of each map from CNY in total.

Respondents performed map-drawing tasks toward the end of sociolinguistic interviews, after free conversation but before specific discussion of language.

Sample responses:

- **general regions**, 17yo female, Cooperstown
- **general regions**, 70yo female, Canton
- **dialect regions**, 50yo female, Sidney
- **dialect regions**, 32yo male, Canton

Overall results: dialect maps

**Broad consensus** that the New York City area or Downstate is dialectally distinct:

- 88% of respondents (18/19 CNY, 11/14 NNY) include NYC in a dialect region that does not extend beyond the southeastern sector of the state.
- Majority of such regions (13 CNY, 10 NNY) are labeled with NYC-specific names —“the City”, “New York”, “Bronx”, “Brooklyn”, etc.
- **Widespread** nationwide belief in small NYC dialect area shown by Preston (1986).
- **Existence** of such a dialect is more or less empirically accurate (Labov et al. 2006).
- Maps vary greatly in its extent (which is not empirically very well-established either).
- On 7 maps (6 from CNY) some or all of Long Island is a separate dialect from NYC.

**No other dialect region** was indicated by more than 28% of respondents:

- 9/33 have a North Country–type dialect region; 5 have a Western New York region.
- Other than NYC, **empirical** dialect regions have little influence on hand-drawn maps:
  - Only 2 are aware of a dialect region containing Buffalo & Syracuse but not Albany.
**No systematic difference** between NNY and CNY maps (except maybe Long Island).
Overall results: non-linguistic maps
Several regions found on majorities of general-region maps:
• Western New York region, including Buffalo but not as far east as Syracuse:
drawn by 9/14 NNY respondents, 14/19 CNY, 70% overall.
• North Country/Adirondack region, between Vermont and St. Lawrence River:
drawn by 6/14 NNY, about 13/19 CNY (plus 2 questionable), 58% overall.
• East side and/or west side of North Country, as individual regions not reaching all
  the way across, were drawn by an additional 7 NNY and 1 CNY.
• Central New York regions, not extending east to Albany or west to Buffalo:
drawn by 9/14 NNY, 8/19 CNY, 52% overall.
• 7/19 CNY respondents drew East-Central region including Syracuse and Albany
• Downstate/New York City regions, within the southeastern sector of the state:
drawn by 6/14 NNY, 16/19 CNY, 67% overall
  • 6 of those CNY maps include multiple regions in the southeastern sector
    —e.g., dividing it into NYC proper, Long Island, and “Downstate”.

Only significant difference ($p < 0.02$) between NNY and CNY in major regions:
NNY significantly less likely to draw non-linguistic Downstate/NYC-area region
(though a few labeled a region “Downstate” or “City” that extended up to Albany).
NNY is less convinced than CNY that there’s a geographically compact general-
  purpose region including NYC, though they agree there is such a dialect region.

Another way of looking at it: smallest regions including New York City.
NNY and CNY more or less agree on the size of the dialect region containing NYC,
but have very different opinions on the smallest such general-purpose region.
Similarly, on CNY maps, NYC dialect regions look similar to NYC general regions,
but on NNY maps, NYC’s dialect region is much more compact.

Conclusion
People from NNY believe the SE part of the state is a region with a distinctive dialect,
even if it doesn’t come to mind when asked just to “name major regions”.
Thus the New York City area’s reputation as a dialect region is stronger or more
pervasive than its reputation as just a general-purpose region.

What non-linguists do when asked where dialect boundaries are is not necessarily just
repurposing regional boundaries that are already salient for other reasons
(though presumably general-region boundaries can still have an influence).
People from different communities can agree on where dialect regions are
while disagreeing on what regions are salient in general.

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