

Alaskan views of English in North America and Alaska: The influence of age and local orientation on perceptions at different geographic levels

Although English as spoken in Alaska remains understudied, some features of Alaskan Englishes are known. For example, Alaskans (at least in urbanized areas) participate in a vowel shift currently occurring across much of North America known by various names, most commonly the Canadian or California Shift, and a number of lexical items are diagnostic of Alaskan Englishes. However, no matter how little or much is known from linguistic studies of Alaska, Alaskans themselves have developed their own perceptions of Englishes inside and outside of Alaska. The nature of these perceptions is of particular interest due to geography: Alaska is one of only two states that does not share a border with any of the contiguous states, and getting to any other state requires at least a flight of multiple hours' duration. Therefore, Alaskans may hold markedly different perceptions about local varieties than those from elsewhere in the United States.

This presentation reports the results of a series of folk dialectology tasks completed by Alaskans. In the first, respondents were given blank maps of North America plus Hawai'i and Puerto Rico showing only coastal outlines, and asked to hand-draw English-language dialect regions; this was followed by a similar task involving a map of Alaska. In the second, respondents were given maps of the United States showing state and territorial boundaries, and asked to rate those areas along several axes designed to access local beliefs about both regional culture and language; this was followed by a similar task involving a map of Alaska showing borough and census area (i.e., county-equivalent) borders. In all cases, respondents were asked to limit their responses to their beliefs about English, and not to include other languages.

In general terms, Alaskans have perceptions of dialect regions in the United States that are similar to those seen in studies of respondents from the contiguous states (e.g., a very strong awareness of the existence of the Southern American English dialect region), showing that folk beliefs about regional linguistic differentiation generally held by residents of the contiguous United States do extend to Alaska. However, the actual details of those perceptions differ in important ways, so that, for example, Alaskans see the linguistic South as covering more area than anyone in the contiguous states believes. Further, this pattern cut across all social factors tracked (age, sex, Alaskan region, and local orientation)—essentially, there appears to be a general Alaskan view of the dialect regions of North America as a whole.

When mapping Alaskan Englishes specifically, however, the metrics for assessing dialect regions were different. Although some still explicitly based their perceived dialect boundaries on region, two alternative patterns emerged along with the shift to a more local frame: an urban-rural distinction, and distinctions based on the areas in which various Native Alaskan languages were historically spoken. In addition, social factors influenced what method Alaskans were more likely to use when showing perceived dialect boundaries. While there was no difference by sex and region of residence, younger Alaskans and those with a higher degree of local orientation were more likely to use Native Alaskan language regions. The age effect is particularly interesting given that the trend toward using historical Alaska Native language regions as a template of sorts begins earlier than one would expect if the cause had been the mandated inclusion of information about Native Alaskan languages in primary and secondary education in the late twentieth century, suggesting that a growing awareness of Native Alaskan languages drove things like changes in the educational system rather than the other way around.