Sources and further reading

For a discussion of the various constructions, examples of their use and comments on them, see F. Th. Visser, *An Historical Syntax of the English Language*, Volume I (Leiden: Brill, 1963, pp. 236–45).

MYTH 17

They Speak Really Bad English Down South and in New York City

Dennis R. Preston

Imagine this. You have persistent bad headaches. Aspirin and other miracle products don't make them go away. Your family doctor decides it's time to have a specialist's opinion. He hasn't said the words, but you turn the terrible possibility over in your mind – 'Brain tumor!'

You appear at the New York City office of Dr N. V. Cramden, Brain Surgeon; you sign in and await the beginning of the process that will reveal your fate. Cramden approaches and speaks:

'Hey, how's it goin'? Rotten break, huh? Ya got a pain in da noggin'. Don't sweat it; I'm gonna fix ya up. Hey, nois! Ovuh heah! Bring me dat whatchamacallit. How da hell am I gonna take care of my patient heah if you don't hand me dem tools? Dat's a goil.'

You still have your clothes on (it's a brain surgeon's office, right?), so you just head for the door, stopping at the front desk and tell the receptionist that someone in the examining room is posing as Dr Cramden. Maybe you never return to your trusted family doctor, since he or she has sent you to a quack. Whatever your decision, you do not continue under the care of Dr Cramden.

Linguists know that language variety does not correlate with intelligence or competence, so Dr Cramden could well be one of the best brain surgeons in town. Nevertheless, popular associations of certain varieties of English with professional and intellectual competence run so deep that Dr Cramden will not get to crack many crania unless he learns to sound very different.

A primary linguistic myth, one nearly universally attached to

minorities, rural people and the less well educated, extends in the United States even to well-educated speakers of some regional varieties. That myth, of course, is that some varieties of a language are not as good as others.

Professional linguists are happy with the idea that some varieties of a language are more standard than others; that is a product of social facts. Higher-status groups impose their behaviors (including language) on others, claiming theirs are the standard ones. Whether you approve of that or not, the standard variety is selected through purely social processes and has not one whit more logic, historical consistency, communicative expressivity or internal complexity or systematicity than any other variety. Since every region has its own social stratification, every area also has a share of both standard and nonstandard speakers.

I admit to a little cheating above. I made Dr Cramden a little more of a tough kid from the streets than I should have. The truth is, I need not have done so. Although linguists believe that every region has its own standard variety, there is widespread belief in the US that some regional varieties are more standard than others and, indeed, that some regional varieties are far from the standard – particularly those of the South and New York City (NYC).

Please understand the intensity of this myth, for it is not a weakly expressed preference; in the US it runs deep, strong and true, and evidence for it comes from what real people (not professional linguists) believe about language variety. First, consider what northern US (Michigan) speakers have to say about the South:

(Mimics Southern speech) 'As y'all know, I came up from Texas when I was about twenty-one. And I talked like this. Probably not so bad, but I talked like this; you know I said "thiyus" ["this"] and "thayut" ["that"] and all those things. And I had to learn to learn reeeal [elongated vowel] fast how to talk like a Northerner. 'Cause if I talked like this people'd think I'm the dumbest shit around.

'Because of TV, though, I think there's a kind of standard English that's evolving. And the kind of thing you hear on the TV is something

that's broadcast across the country, so most people are aware of that, but there are definite accents in the South.'

Next, consider NYC, which fares no better, even in self-evaluation, as the American sociolinguist William Labov has shown. Here are some opinions he collected in the mid 1960s:

'I'll tell you, you see, my son is always correcting me. He speaks very well – the one that went to [two years of] college. And I'm glad that he corrects me – because it shows me that there are many times when I don't pronounce my words correctly.'

'Bill's college alumni group – we have a party once a month in Philadelphia. Well, now I know them about two years and every time we're there – at a wedding, at a party, a shower – they say, if someone new is in the group: "Listen to Jo Ann talk!" I sit there and I babble on, and they say, "Doesn't she have a ridiculous accent!" and "It's so New Yorkerish and all!" '

Such anecdotal evidence could fill many pages and includes even outsider imitations of the varieties, such as mock partings for Southerners – 'Y'all come back and see us sometime now, ya heah?' – and the following putative NYC poem which plays on the substitution of t- and d-like for th-sounds and the loss of the r-sound (and modification of the vowel) in such words as 'bird':

> *T'ree little boids sittin' on a coib,*
> *Eatin' doity woims and sayin' doity woids.*

These informal assessments are bolstered by quantitative studies. Nearly 150 people from south-eastern Michigan (of European-American ethnicity, of both sexes and of all ages and social classes) rated (on a scale of one to ten) the degree of 'correctness' of English spoken in the fifty states, Washington, DC, and NYC. Figure 1 shows the average scores for this task.

These responses immediately confirm what every American knows

– the lowest ratings are for the South and NYC (and nearby New Jersey, infected by its proximity to the NYC metropolitan area). Only these areas score averages below '5'; Alabama, the heart of the horrible South, scores in the '3' range.
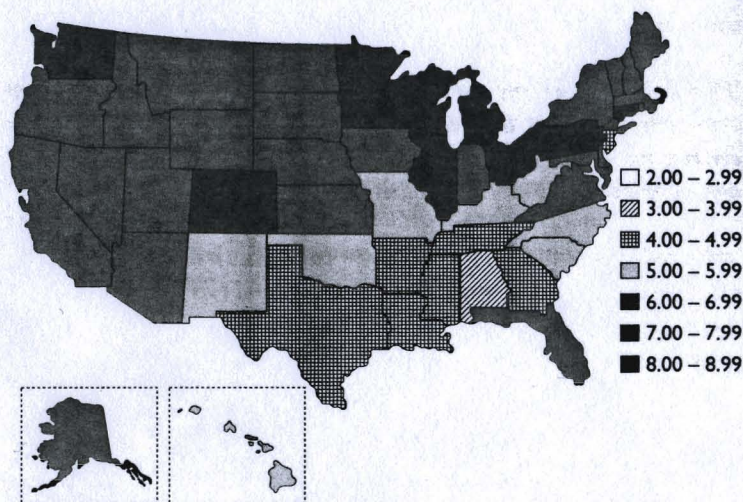

Figure 1: Mean scores of the rankings for 'correct English' of the fifty states, Washington, DC, and NYC by south-eastern Michigan respondents ('1' = 'worst English'; '10' = 'best English')

Although it is not the major focus here, it is also clear that the Michiganders doing these ratings think pretty well of themselves; they give their home state a ranking in the '8' range, the only area so rewarded. Linguists call such local hubris 'linguistic security'. It is not hard to determine why: Michiganders believe another interesting myth – that they do not speak a dialect at all (although, as any linguist will assert, if you speak a human language, you must speak some dialect of it, even if it is a bland Michigan one). When Michigan respondents carry out another task, which asks them to draw on a blank map of the US where they think the various dialect areas are and label them, results such as Figure 2 emerge, confirming their local linguistic pride.
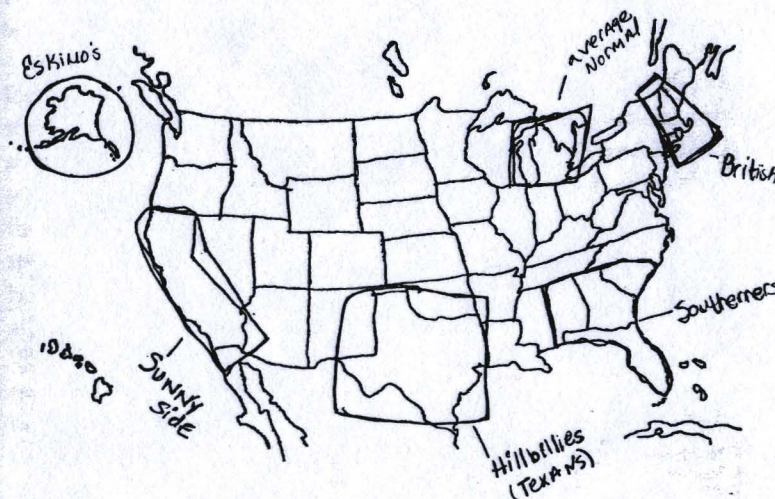
Figure 2: Hand-drawn map of a Michigan respondent's idea of the dialect areas of the US

The respondent who drew Figure 2 places only Michigan in the 'normal' area and, as we would expect from the rankings of Figure 1, impolite things are said about the South (although not NYC). If one studies a large number of such hand-drawn maps, it is possible to produce a generalized map such as Figure 3. This map shows not only where Michigan respondents draw lines for the areas of the US but also how many respondents drew a boundary around each one. The most important thing to note about Figure 3 is the number of Michigan respondents who drew a South – 138 out of 147 (94 per cent). Even the home area (which houses the uniquely correct Michigan speech) is registered as a separate speech region by only 90 respondents (61 per cent). The third most frequently drawn area is, not surprisingly, the area which contains NYC (80; 54 per cent).

These Michiganders seem, therefore, to hear dialect differences not as linguists do – on the basis of objective differences in the language system – but on the basis of their evaluation of the correctness of
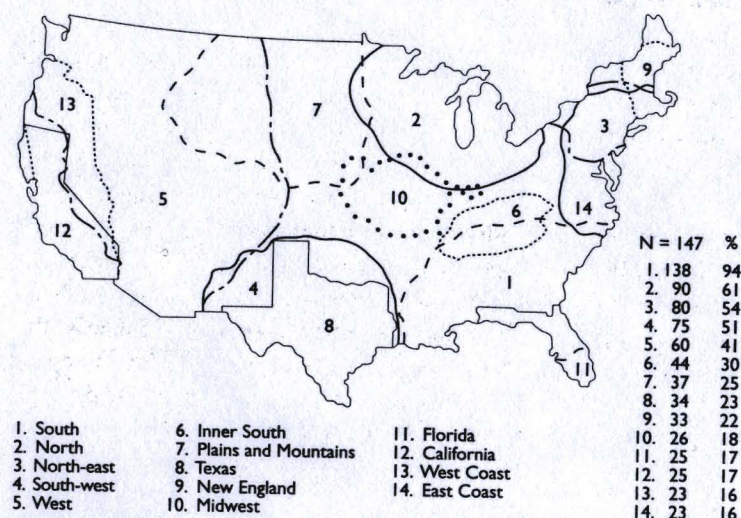
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			1. 138	94
			2. 90	61
			3. 80	54
			4. 75	51
			5. 60	41
			6. 44	30
			7. 37	25
			8. 34	23
			9. 33	22
1. South	6. Inner South	11. Florida	10. 26	18
2. North	7. Plains and Mountains	12. California	11. 25	17
3. North-east	8. Texas	13. West Coast	12. 25	17
4. South-west	9. New England	14. East Coast	13. 23	16
5. West	10. Midwest		14. 23	16

Figure 3: Generalized map of 147 Michigan respondents' idea of the dialect areas of the US

areas. The linguistic South, the area perceived most consistently as incorrect, quite simply exists for these respondents more than any other area.

Michiganders are not unique; in other areas where this work has been done, a South is always drawn by the highest percentage of respondents – South Carolina 94 per cent, NYC 92 per cent, western New York 100 per cent, southern Indiana 86 per cent and Oregon 92 per cent. Only Hawai'ians recognize another area (their own) more frequently, and only marginally (97 per cent Hawai'i; 94 per cent South).

Also important to these respondents is the other place where they believe bad English is spoken. A 'North-east' (a small area with a focus in NYC) or NYC itself figures very high in the percentages – South Carolina 46 per cent, NYC itself 64 per cent, western New York 45 per cent, southern Indiana 51 per cent, Oregon 75 per cent and

Hawai'i 57 per cent, nearly all of these second-place scores (after the South).

A study of labels on hand-drawn maps, such as the one shown in Figure 2, by fifty respondents each from south-eastern Michigan, southern Indiana, South Carolina and Oregon further confirms these stereotypes. The intensity of recognition of the South and NYC as separate speech areas parallels the idea that they are the regions where the most incorrect English is spoken. Of the labels assigned to Southern speech by Michigan respondents 22 per cent are negative; 36 per cent by Indiana respondents are negative; 31 per cent by Oregon respondents and even 20 per cent by South Carolina respondents. Similarly, the 'North-east' area (which contains NYC) fares poorly: 15 per cent negative labels by Michigan respondents; 18 per cent by Indiana; 24 per cent by Oregon and a whopping 65 per cent by South Carolina.

Negative labels assigned to speech areas overall were low (13 per cent for Michigan respondents; 22 per cent for Indiana, 18 per cent for Oregon – but 32 per cent for South Carolina, a reflection of their evaluation of much non-Southern territory for the entire US, e.g. 33 per cent for California and 30 per cent for the Midwest). One South Carolina respondent identifies everything north of the Mason-Dixon line with the notation 'Them – The Bad Guys' in contrast to the label for the entire South: 'Us – The Good Guys'. Other Southerners note that Northern speech is 'mean' or 'rude', and one calls it 'scratch and claw'. A common caricature of NYC speech refers to its 'nasal' quality and its rate (fast).

There are labels for Southerners, like 'Hillbillies' and 'Hicks', but there are far more 'linguistic' designations – 'drawl', 'twang', 'Rebel slang', and many references to speed (slow).

Finally, what about a quantitative analysis of Southerners' views of the correctness issue? Figure 4 shows the ratings by thirty-six Auburn University students (principally from Alabama, a few from Georgia, and South Carolina).

NYC fares even worse here than in the Michigan ratings; it is the only area to fall in the '3' range. Antipathy to NYC from the South is obvious. Other ratings for correctness, however, show none of the

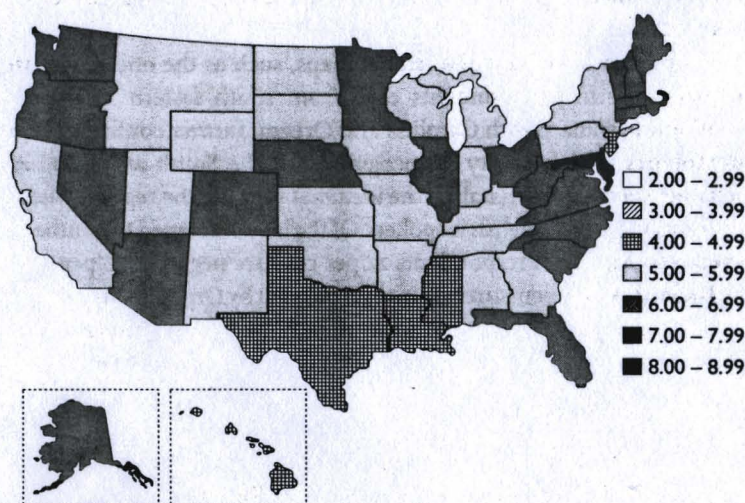|	
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Figure 4: Mean scores of the rankings of the fifty states, Washington, DC, and NYC for 'correct English' by Auburn University (Alabama) students (ratings as in Figure 1)

strength and certainty of the Michigan opinions seen in Figure 1. Michigan respondents consider their speech the best and steadily assign lower ratings the farther South a state is. Imagine a Michigander's disdain for an evaluation of correct English which, as Figure 4 shows, rates the territory from Michigan to Alabama as an undifferentiated '5'!

These 'eastern' Southern respondents, however, also find parts of the South especially lacking in correct English, namely the Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas areas just to the west of them, which they put in the '4' range. Their own areas (rated in the '5' and '6' ranges) are neither fish nor fowl, and they reserve the best ratings (only one step up at '7') for Maryland and the national capital, Washington, DC, both areas within a more general southern speech region.

Southerners pretty clearly suffer from what linguists would call 'linguistic insecurity', but they manage to deflect the disdain of North-

erners to adjacent areas rather than suffer the principal shame locally. They do not rate themselves at the top of the heap (as Michiganders do), and they appear to associate 'correct English' with some official or national status (Washington, DC).

If Southerners don't find their own speech correct, can they find anything redeeming about it? Figure 5 shows what these same Southerners believe about language 'pleasantness'.

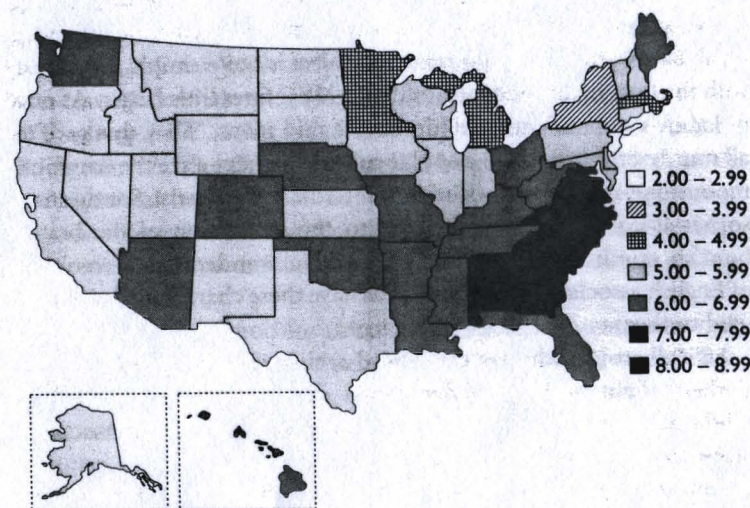|	
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Figure 5: Mean scores of the rankings for 'pleasant English' by Auburn University (Alabama) students ('1' = 'least pleasant English'; '10' = 'most pleasant English')

Here is the neat reversal of Figure 1 which did not emerge in Figure 4. Just as Michiganders found their variety 'most correct' ('8'), these principally Alabama students find theirs 'most pleasant' (also '8'). As one moves north, a steady disapproval of the 'friendly' aspects of speech (what linguists like to call the 'solidarity' aspects) emerges, leaving Michigan part of a pretty unhospitable northern area, itself a '4'.

There is one thing, however, that Michiganders and Alabamians agree on. NYC (and its partner in linguistic 'grime', nearby New

Jersey) are at the bottom of the scale for both 'correctness' and 'pleasantness'. (In fact, the '2' in Figure 5 for New Jersey is the lowest average rating for any area ever assigned in these tests.)

In summary, respondents from all over the US confirm the myth that some regions speak better English than others, and they do not hesitate to indicate that NYC and the South are on the bottom of that pile.

Students of US culture will have little difficulty in understanding the sources of the details of this myth. The South is thought to be rural, backward and uneducated; its dialect is quite simply associated with the features assigned its residents. NYC fares little better. As one of Labov's respondents told him in the mid 1960s, 'They think we're all murderers.' Just as US popular culture has kept alive the barefoot, moonshine-making and drinking, intermarrying, racist Southerner, so has it continued to contribute to the perception of the brash, boorish, criminal, violent New Yorker. Small wonder that the varieties of English associated with these areas have these characteristics attributed to them.

Like all groups who are prejudiced against, Southerners (and New Yorkers) fight back by making their despised language variety a solidarity symbol, but there is no doubt they suffer linguistic insecurity in spite of this defensive maneuver.

Since you now understand that a belief in the superiority or inferiority of regional varieties is simply a US language myth, you can apologetically approach your good old family doctor about the headache problem again. Of course, you are too embarrassed to return to Cramden's office, so you ask for another referral and are sent to Dr B. J. ('Jimmy') Peaseblossom. You are relieved to hear his dulcet tones as he approaches:

'Bubba, haw's it hangin'? Cain't buy no luck, kin yuh? Yore hay-ud ailin' yuh? Don't git all flustrated; I'm gonna fix yew up good. Sweetheart! Looka hyeah! Bring me that thayngamabob, wouldja? How kin Ah take keer of ol' Bubba without mah thayngs? Thank yuh honey!'

Your headaches turn out to be hangovers.

Sources and further reading

The maps and data are taken from my collections. Readers who want an introduction to the folk perceptions of regional speech in the United States may consult my *Perceptual Dialectology* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1989). A current survey of recent and earlier work in this area (including research from the Netherlands, Japan, Germany, Wales, Turkey and France) appears under my editorship as *A Handbook of Perceptual Dialectology* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1997). The quotations from New Yorkers are taken from William Labov's seminal work on NYC speech, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Arlington, VA: The Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966). The work on Oregon has been carried out by Laura Hartley and is reported in *Oregonian Perceptions of American Regional Speech* (East Lansing, MI: MA thesis, Department of Linguistics and Languages, Michigan State University, 1996).

A quantitative method for calculating linguistic insecurity is first introduced in Labov's work cited above but refined and extended to gender in Peter Trudgill's 'Sex, covert prestige and linguistic change in the urban British English of Norwich' in *Language in Society* 1 (1972), pp. 179–95. A good introduction to the techniques and principal findings of the study of language attitudes (and to the functions of language for 'status' and 'solidarity') may be found in Ellen Bouchard Ryan and Howard Giles (eds.), *Attitudes Towards Language Variation* (London: Arnold, 1982).