

2005

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Recommended Citation

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The consequences of conflicting stereotypes: Bostonian perceptions of U.S. dialects¹

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Abstract

This study examines the perceptual dialectology of residents of eastern Massachusetts. The data reveal detailed attention to perceived dialect boundaries, particularly within the northeastern U.S., but also in other regions of the country. As is commonly the case in perceptual dialectology work, the respondents use the tasks presented to them to differentiate their home area from other states. In doing so, however, they exhibit an interesting mix of linguistic security and insecurity. The analysis suggests that respondents have internalized two common but conflicting American stereotypes of Boston residents – the educated elite and working class descendants of immigrants – and rely on these stereotypes when evaluating the home area.

Introduction

There is an increasing body of research within the language attitudes and sociolinguistic literature that examines folk linguistic beliefs about the distribution and salience of dialect boundaries. Building on the work of cultural geographers, Dennis Preston introduced the concept of ‘perceptual dialectology’ in a series of studies that focused on residents of a number of states within the U.S. (Preston 1982, 5-49; 1985; 1989; 1993). Subsequent researchers have extended the inquiry to numerous countries around the world (Preston 1999; Long and Preston 2002). Within the United States, there have been substantial studies that examine the perceptual dialectology of residents of Michigan and Indiana (Preston 1993; 1996), Oregon (Hartley 1996),

¹Published in *American Speech*, 80 (4), 2005, 388-405.

California (Fought 2002), and Georgia and New Jersey (Tamasi 2003), as well as less extensive work in Hawaii, New York, South Carolina, Alabama, western Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Georgia, Missouri, South Dakota, and Washington (Preston 1982, 5-49; Preston 1986, 221-40; Hartley and Preston 1999; Lance 1999; Benson 2003, 307-330).

Within these U.S. perceptual dialectology studies, the northeastern United States is often singled out as a distinct speech region, with minor dialect areas such as ‘New England’ also frequently cited. It is not uncommon for residents of areas outside the Northeast to label the entire New England or even northeastern area as having a ‘Boston’ dialect. The perception of the so-called Boston dialect is typified by reference to the r-lessness of the dialect (as in the phrase “pahk the cah in Hahvahd Yahd”). There are, however, two common and co-existing stereotypes of the region. On the one hand, there are the educated elite – Harvard University professors, Boston Brahmins, and most salient at the moment of writing, recent U.S. presidential candidate Senator John Kerry. On the other end of the spectrum, there is a common stereotype of working class descendants of immigrants (especially Italian and Irish), perpetuated in popular culture through movies such as *Good Will Hunting* and the “character” of ‘Boston Rob’ on the reality TV show *Survivor*.

Since both of these caricatures of Bostonians exist within American popular culture, it is an interesting question as to how residents of this area perceive themselves. To this end, the current study contributes to the growing body of research in the field of perceptual dialectology by detailing the perceptions of U.S. dialects from residents of eastern Massachusetts and examining

the consequences for these residents of conflicting stereotypes in relation to the issue of linguistic security and insecurity.

The data

The study utilized what has become a common methodology for perceptual dialectology research developed by Preston (1989; 1999). Respondents were given four tasks, in the following order:

(1) Map drawing – given a blank map of the United States (with state boundary lines but no labels), respondents were asked to draw lines around areas “where people talk alike” and label those areas;

(2) Degree of difference – respondents were provided an alphabetical list of the 50 states plus New York City and Washington, D.C. and asked to assign a value of 1 to 4 based on how similar the speech in that state was to their own speech (1=people there sound like me, 2=people there sound a little different from me, 3=people there sound very different from me, 4=people there sound so different from me I can’t understand them);

(3) Correctness – respondents were asked to rate each state on a 7-point scale as to how correct the speech of people in that state was (1=least correct, 7=most correct);

(4) Pleasantness – respondents were asked to rate each state on a 7-point scale as to how pleasant the speech of people in that state was (1=least pleasant, 7=most pleasant).

The last two tasks were reversed for half of the population, in order to reduce any ordering effects.

The respondents in this study were residents of eastern Massachusetts, primarily from the metropolitan Boston area. A total of 62 participants completed the surveys; of these, 12 were

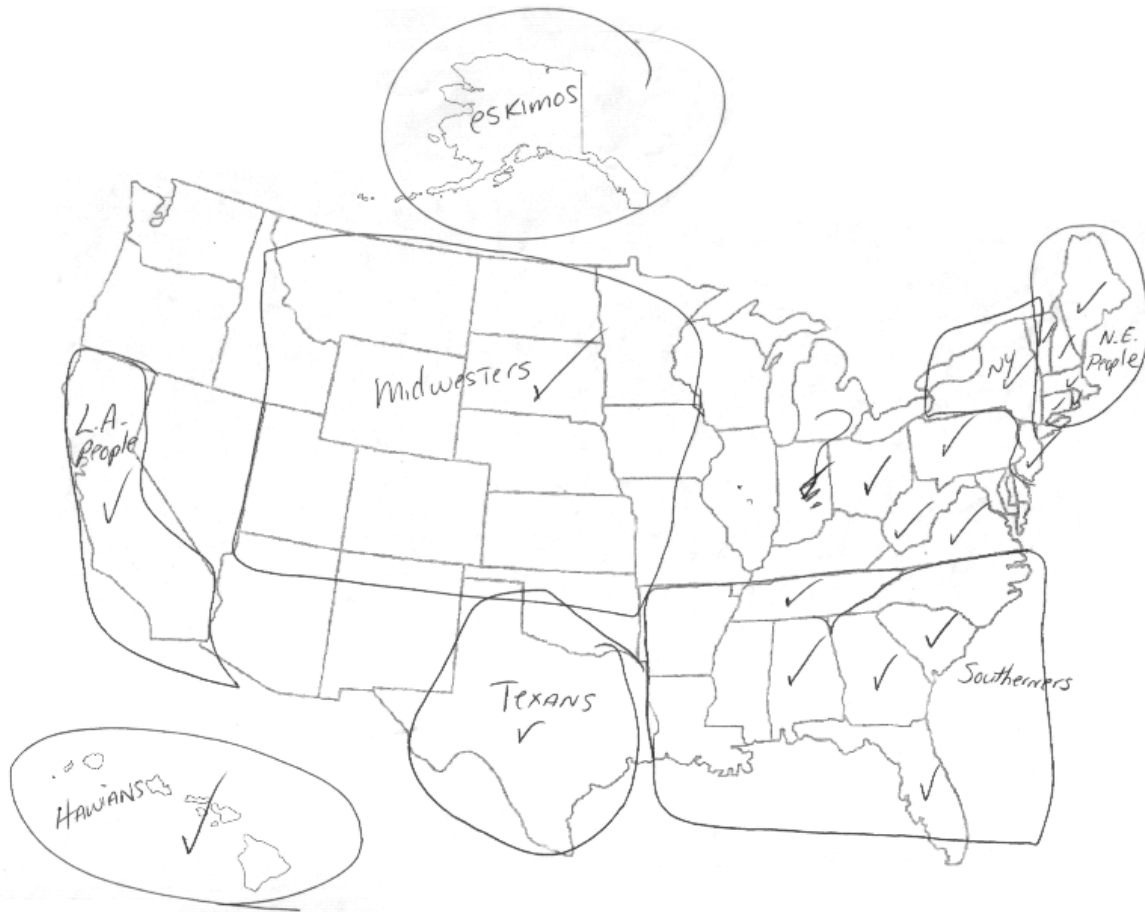
eliminated due to either incomplete questionnaires or because the respondents had lived outside of Massachusetts for a majority of their lives. The remaining 50 respondents were fairly equally distributed across sex (21 females, 29 males) and age categories (28 ages 18-29, the remaining 22 distributed across three age categories between 30 and 60), and all classified themselves as European-American.

Perceptual dialect boundaries: Individual and composite maps

A look at individual hand-drawn maps provides a starting point for understanding where Bostonians¹ believe dialect boundaries in the U.S. exist. The four maps in figures 1-4 illustrate some common perceptual boundaries within the U.S., but also delineate some more detailed boundaries within the local area than are characteristically found among respondents from other areas.

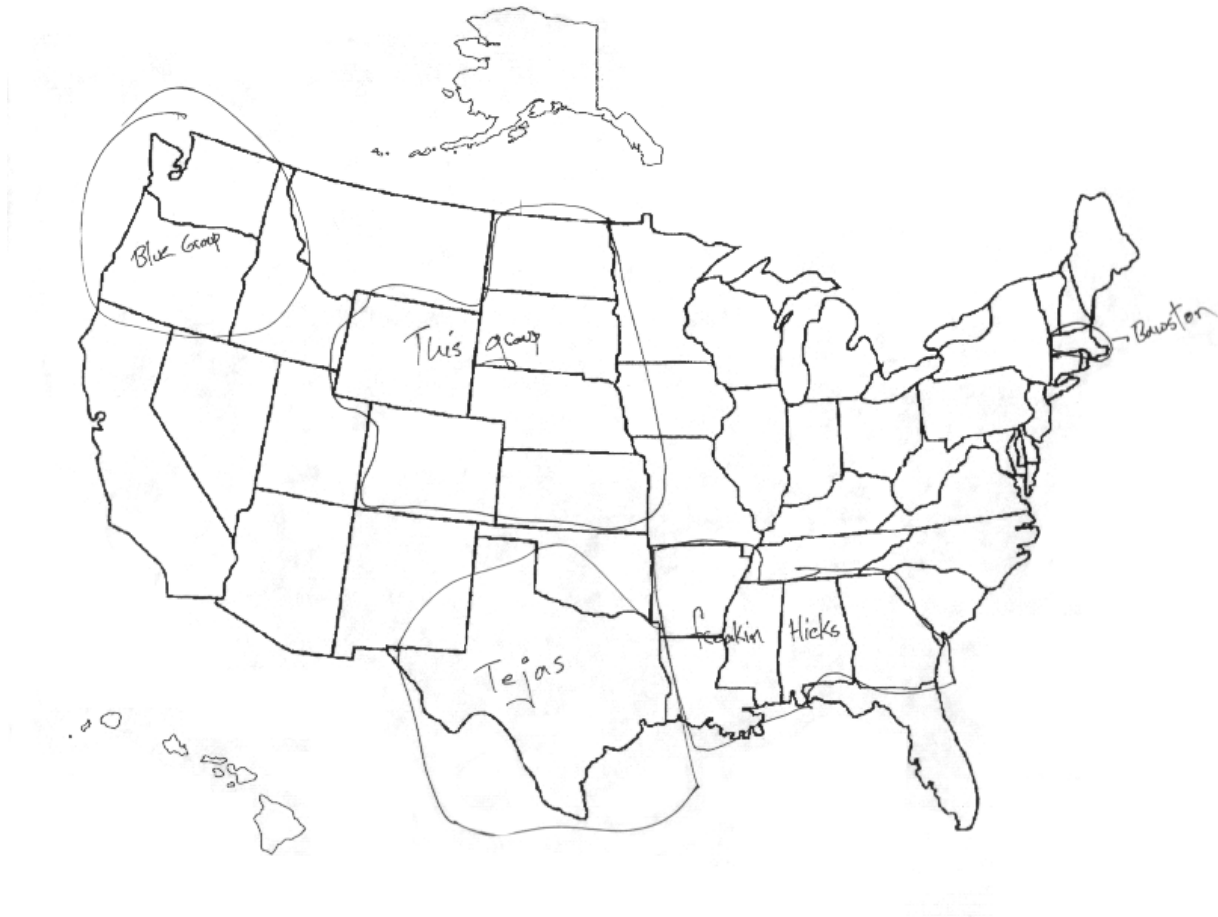
Figure 1 shows a typical map for the first task. The respondent delineates Southern, New England and Midwest regions. He also singles out Texas, Hawaii, and Alaska as distinct regions. Furthermore, he indicates, more through lack of than actual delineation, a Great Lakes region. His label of '?' indicates some uncertainty about this region, although it is not clear as to whether this uncertainty stems from the fact that he doesn't know if this is a distinct region or he just doesn't know what to call it. One thing that is not typical for the map-drawing task for residents from other states but seems to be fairly common for Boston residents is the designation of a New York dialect region, which includes New York state, New York City and often New Jersey.²

Figure 1
Hand-drawn map



In Figure 2, we again see the typical grouping of southern states, albeit fewer than in Figure 1, as a speech area, this time with a perjorative label ‘freakin Hicks.’ The respondent also circles Texas as a speech region, and the label ‘Tejas’ reveals attention to Spanish language influence in this area. While many residents from other regions circle a general Northeast or New England region, this respondent singles out Massachusetts, using the label ‘Bawston,’ with a spelling that reveals sensitivity to the phonetic reality of Eastern New England as a low-back vowel conflation area.

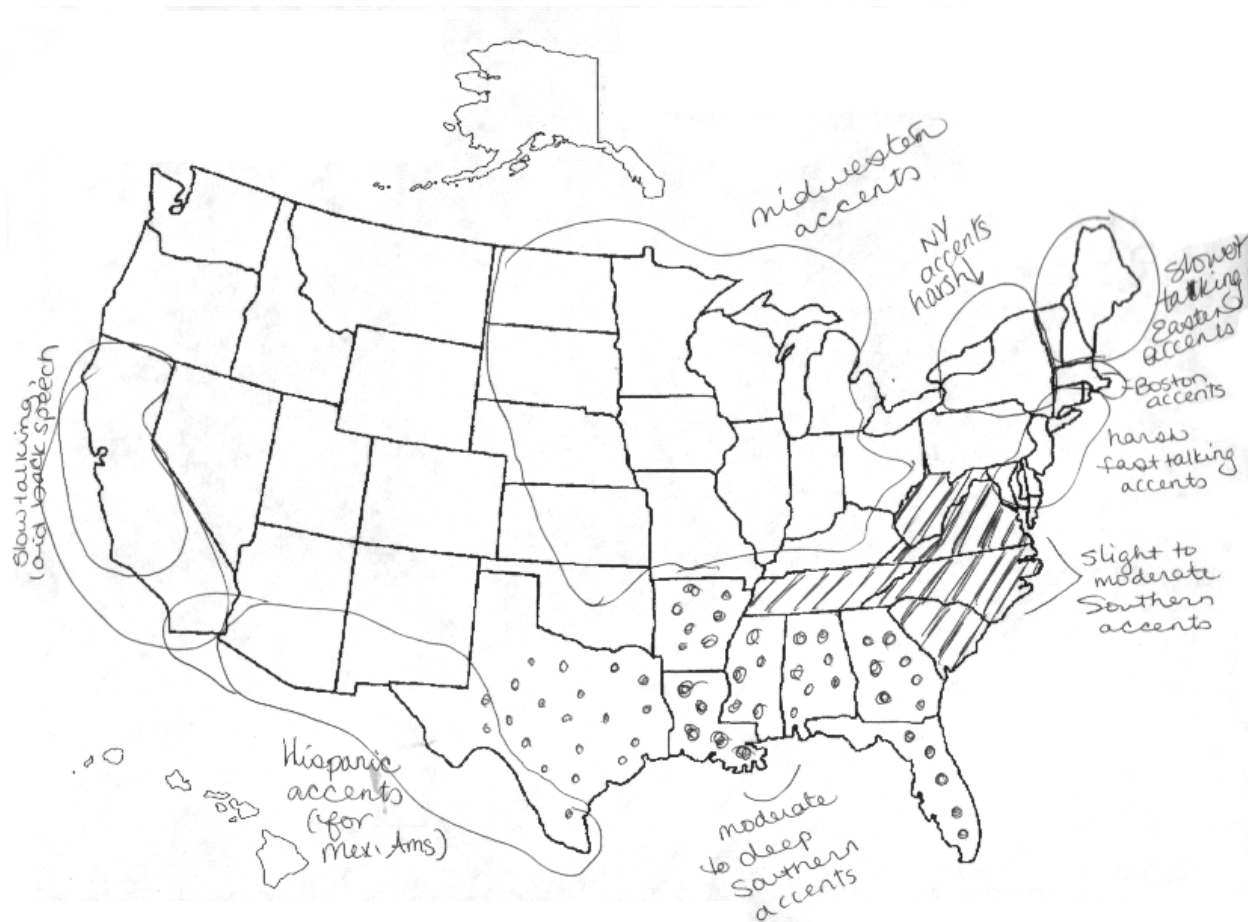
Figure 2
Hand-drawn map



The respondent who drew the map in Figure 3 also drew a New York region, adding the evaluative label 'harsh.' Notice the sensitivity to dialect regions within what respondents from other areas often draw as a general Northeast. In addition to a New York region, she separates northern New England (VT, NH and ME) from Massachusetts, and further delineates a coastal Northeast region that extends from Rhode Island to Maryland. This attention to dialect regions within her local area spills over into the South as well, as she draws distinctions between the outer or coastal South areas that have 'slight to moderate Southern accents,' as opposed to states

in the 'deep' South. She also separates the Southwest, where she finds 'Hispanic accents (for Mex. Ams).'

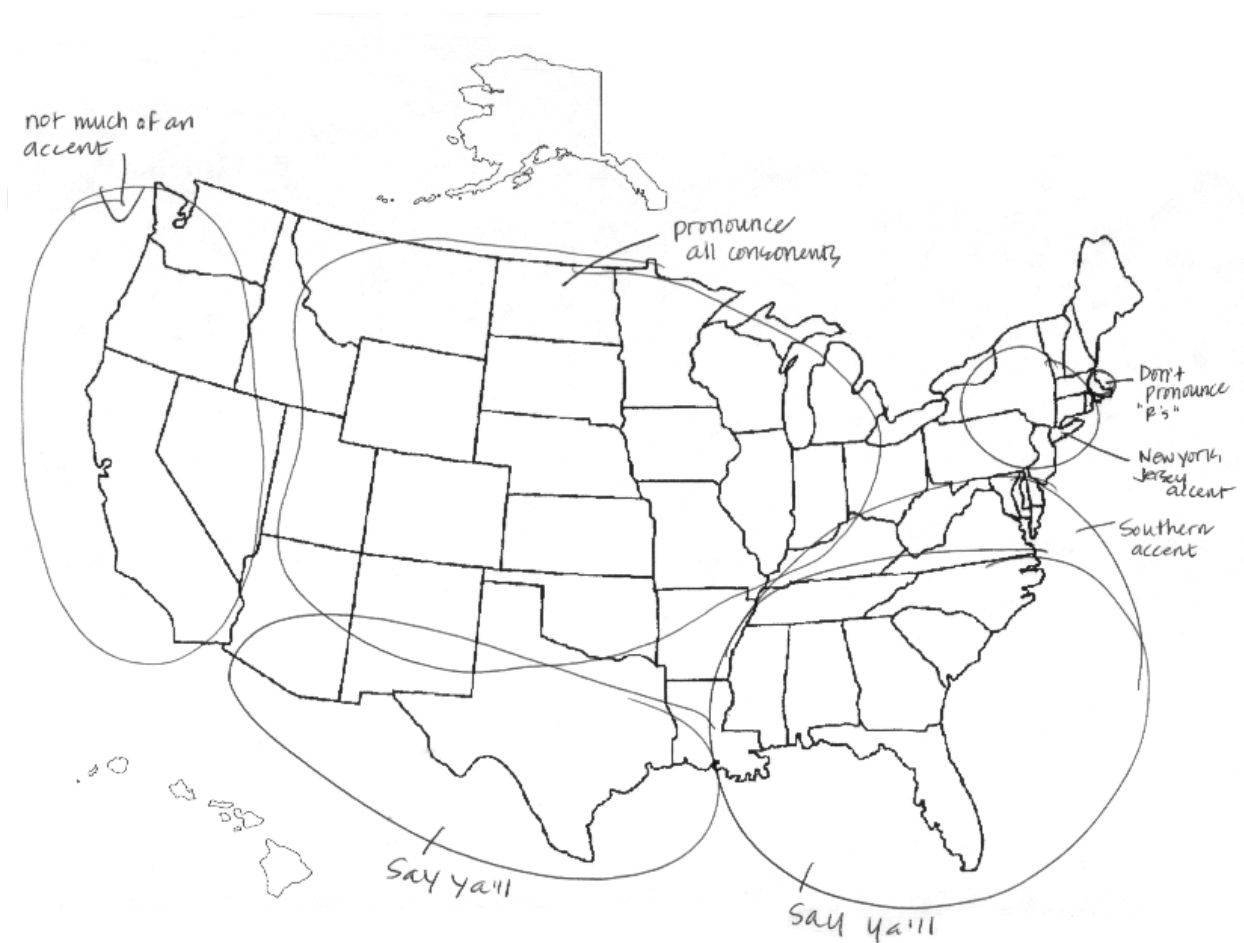
Figure 3
Hand-drawn map



The map in Figure 4 is also interesting because of its detailed attention to the local area. In this case, the respondent circles not the entire state of Massachusetts, but simply the easternmost third of the state and notes that in this region, people 'Don't pronounce "R's",' a comment that again shows awareness of a distinctive dialect feature. Notice also the vast midwestern area, where, in contrast to Boston, people 'pronounce all consonants.' In the South, people 'say y'all,' while on the West Coast, there is 'not much of an accent.'

A composite analysis of all the hand-drawn maps reveals both the location and salience of various U.S. regional dialects within the minds of these Bostonian residents. Table 1 shows the frequency with which regions were identified as being distinct speech areas.

Figure 4
Hand-drawn map



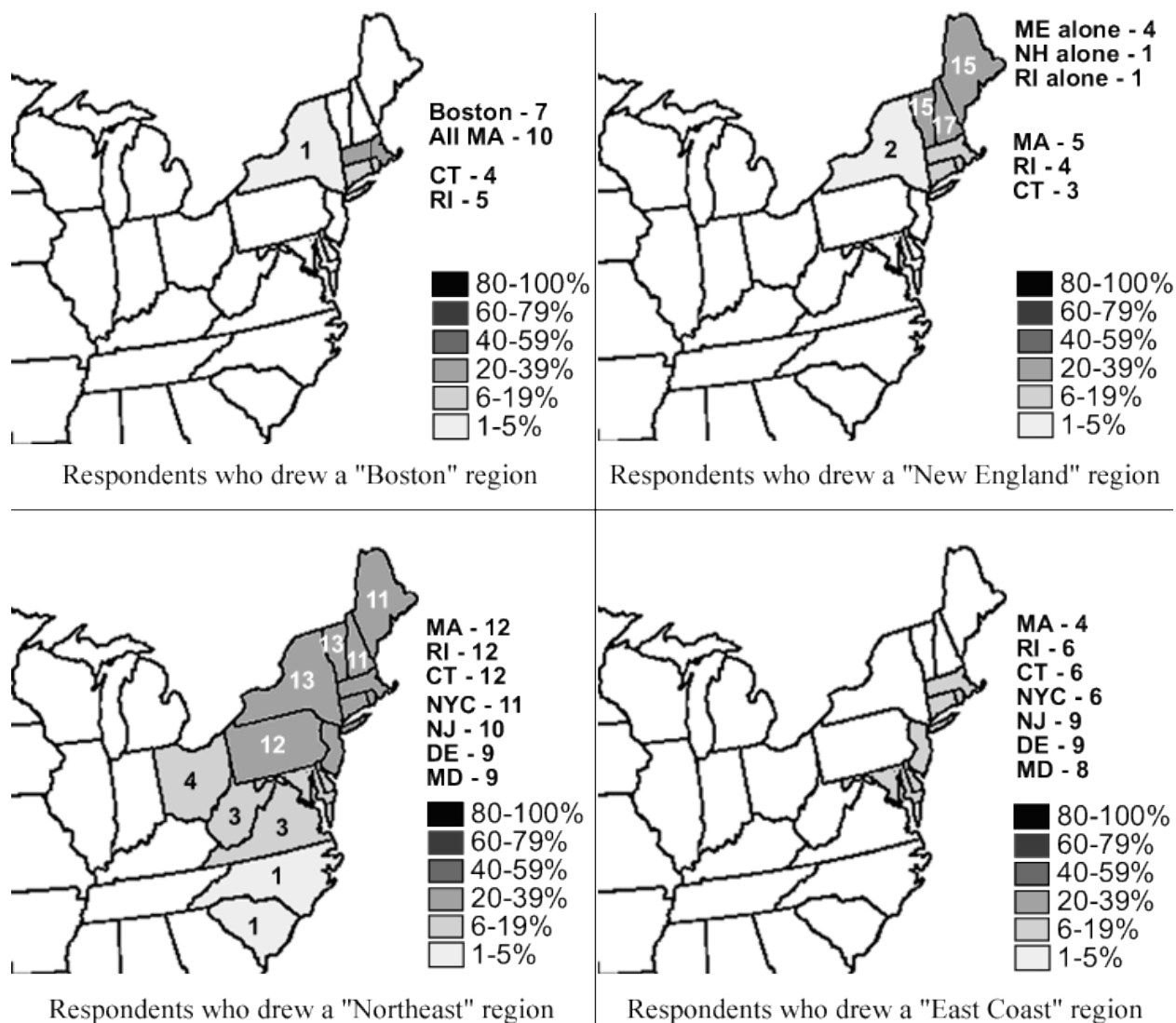
As is typically the case in perceptual dialectology studies within the U.S., the South is the most frequently designated area, with other major areas such as the Midwest and the West also being fairly frequently identified. What is most interesting about these respondents, particularly in contrast to residents from other areas, however, is the lack of agreement as to how to delineate

the states in the Northeast. While 78% of respondents drew a region that includes Boston, there is an almost even split between those for whom this region is a Northeast, as opposed to a smaller New England region, or just a Boston area. This attention to the local area is not uncommon, but the lack of uniformity reveals that Bostonians are conflicted in terms of their regional affiliation.

Table 1
Frequency of identification of dialect regions

Region Identified	# respondents identifying region (n=50)	% respondents identifying region
South	42	84%
Local area*	39	78%
<i>(Northern) New England</i>	17	34%
<i>Boston/Southern New England</i>	17	34%
<i>Northeast</i>	15	30%
<i>East Coast</i>	9	18%
Texas/Southwest	28	56%
Midwest	27	54%
NY/NJ	23	46%
West	19	38%
Coastal/Outer South	12	24%
California	11	22%
Northern	11	22%
Hawaii	10	20%
West Coast	9	18%
Northwest	9	18%
Alaska	8	16%
Great Lakes	7	14%
Louisiana	5	10%
Florida	5	10%
Maine	4	8%
<i>*Distribution of Massachusetts within regions</i>		
MA/Boston alone	13	33%
Within Northeast	13	33%
Within Southern New England	5	13%
Within East Coast	4	10%
Within greater New England	4	10%
Within NY/NJ	1	3%

Figure 5
Results of hand-drawn maps of the local area



In addition to understanding what perceptual dialect regions exist for Bostonians, it is also important to know which states are included in each region in the minds of these respondents.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of states within the various local area delineations. Figures 6-9 show the perceptual boundaries of four other major regions. These figures show both the

number and percentage of respondents (out of a total of 50) who included each state in the region when they circled it on their hand-drawn maps.

Figure 6
Results of hand-drawn maps of the 'South'

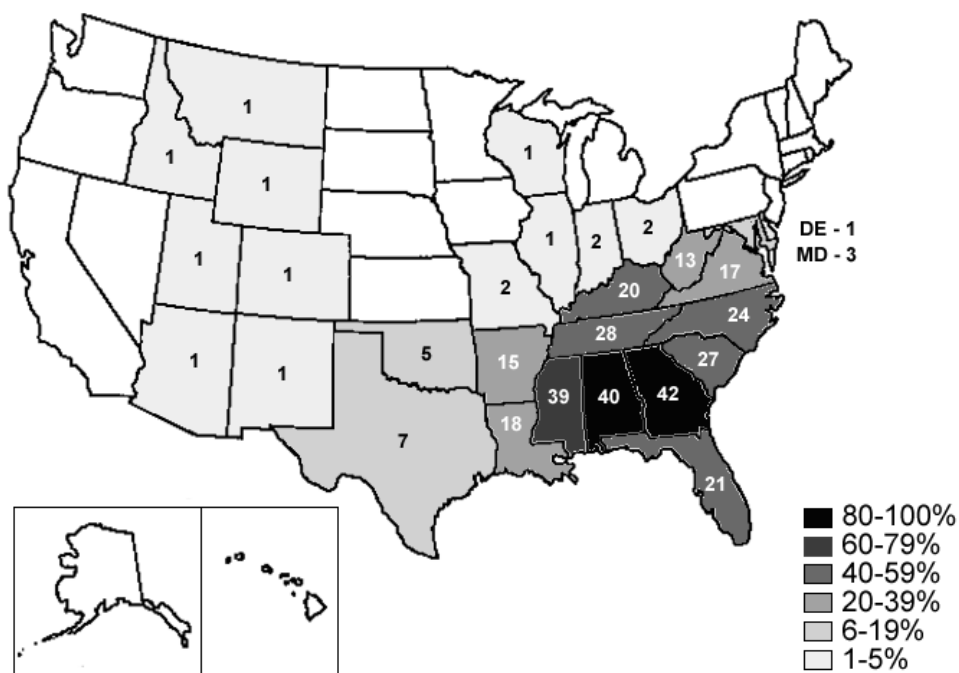


Figure 7
Results of hand-drawn maps of 'Texas/Southwest'

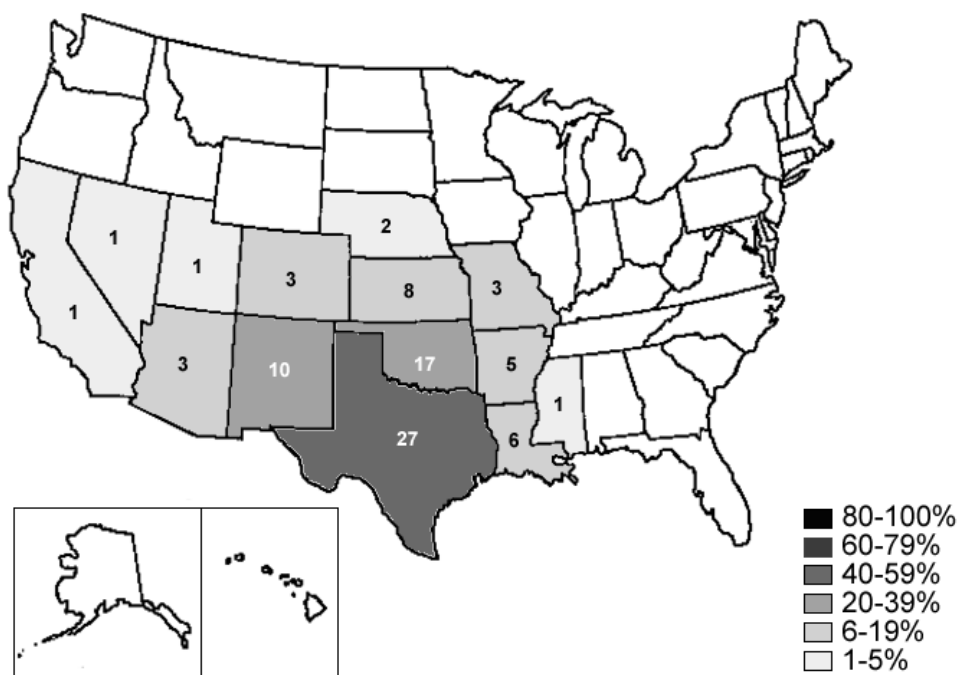


Figure 8
Results of hand-drawn maps of the 'Midwest'

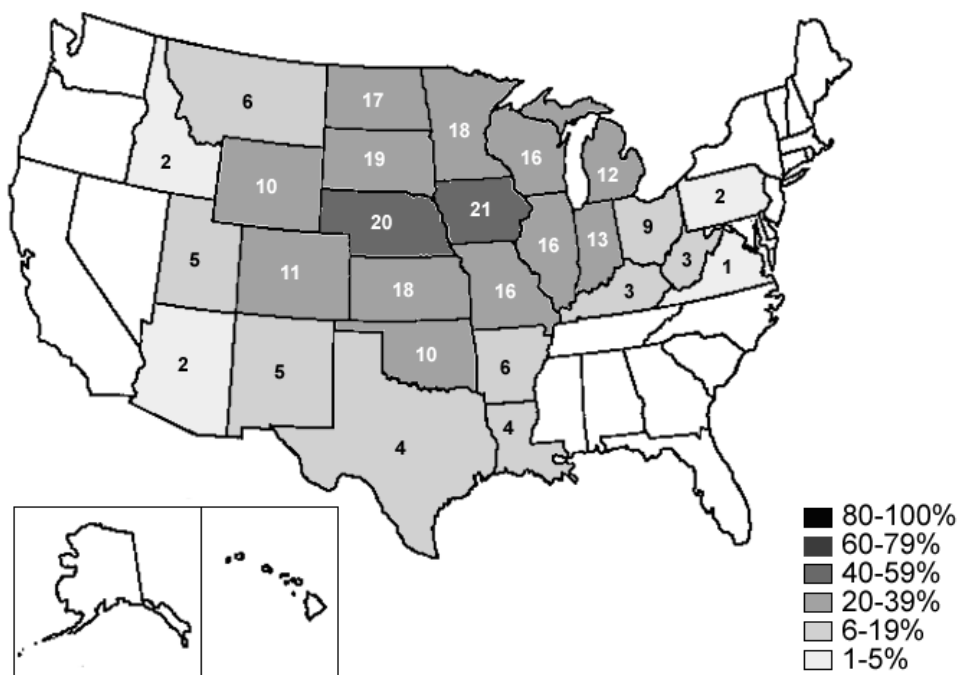
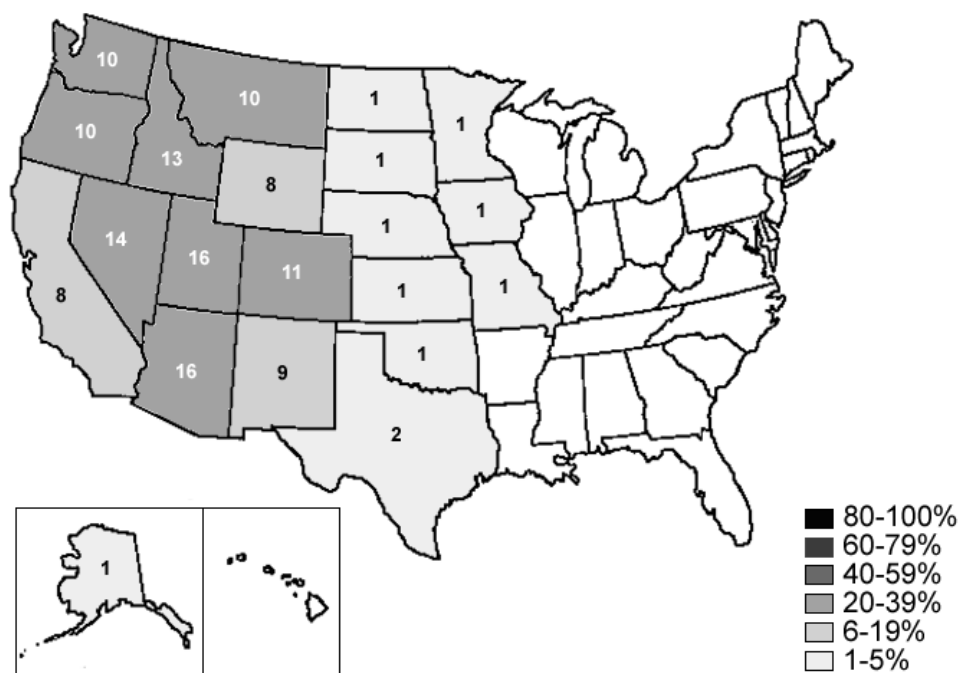


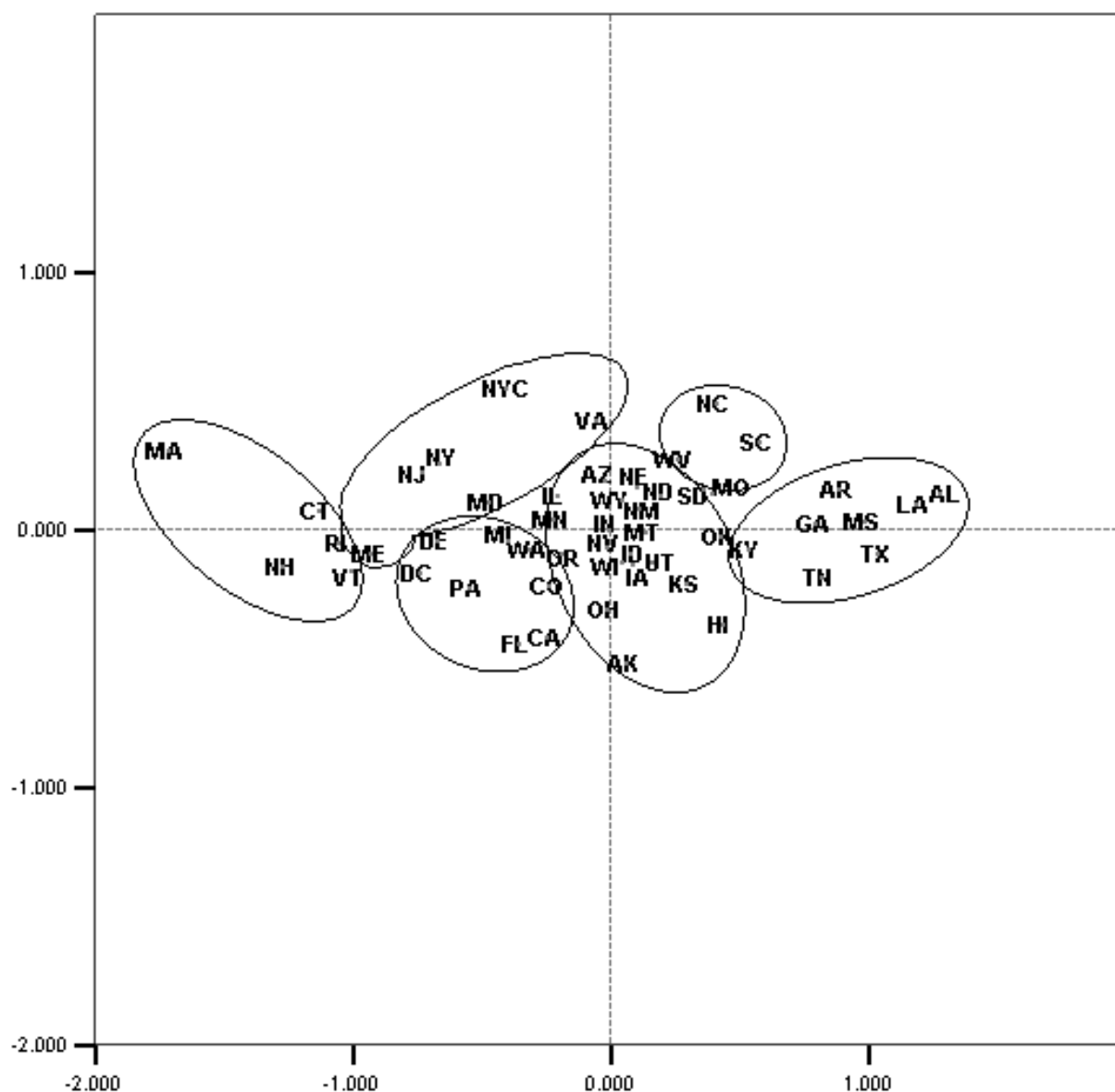
Figure 9
Results of hand-drawn maps of the 'West'



How different are perceptual regions?

While analysis of hand-drawn maps provides a good starting point for understanding Bostonian perceptions of U.S. dialect regions, a more precise picture emerges through analysis of the degree of difference ratings. Ratings for the 52 areas (50 states plus New York City and Washington, D.C.) were subject to multidimensional scaling analysis (MDS), which produced the chart shown in Figure 10. While MDS analysis provides a graphic picture of perceptual clusters, this can be supplemented with K-means cluster analysis to obtain a more distinct picture.³ The circles in Figure 10 represent the results of K-means cluster analysis for these data.

Figure 10
MDS analysis of degree of difference with K-means clusters



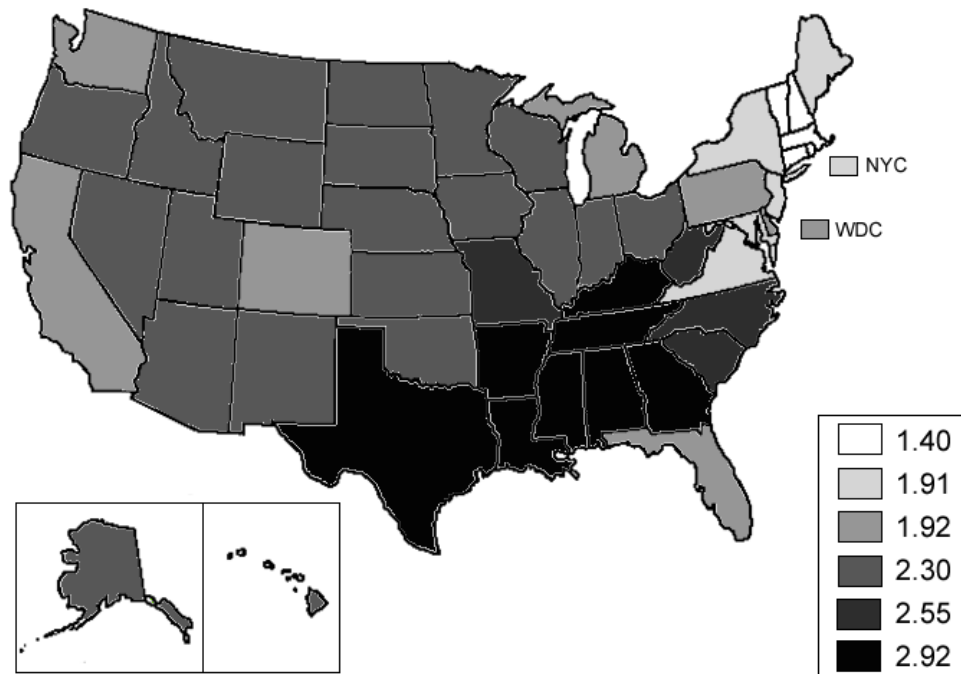
This combination of MDS and K-means cluster analysis for the degree of difference rating task reinforces the major perceptual dialect boundaries of New England, a (non-New England) East Coast region,⁴ a large West/Midwest region,⁵ a “deep” South, and an outer South. There is also a geographically disparate cluster containing CA, CO, DC, DE, FL, MI, PA and WA. This

suggests that when evaluating how people in other states talk, respondents clearly have more than accent in mind. Although these data were collected well before the 2004 U.S. elections, it is intriguing to consider this cluster in light of the “blue state/red state” distinction that has emerged in the past two presidential elections. With the exception of FL and CO (both swing states that narrowly went for President Bush in the 2004 election), the other states in this cluster are so-called “blue” (i.e. Democratic) states, such as the states of the northeast. There are, of course, a few other “blue” states (e.g. Minnesota, Wisconsin, Oregon) that do not appear in this cluster. Still, the fact that beliefs about political orientation might creep into a language attitudes study is an interesting (although not entirely surprising) phenomenon.⁶

The horizontal dimension of the MDS chart is clearly based on mean scores for each state (which ranged from 1.06 for Massachusetts to 3.12 for Alabama). The vertical dimension is harder to interpret. It may be a “distinctiveness of accent” dimension, since the Midwestern states (which are often labeled as have “no accent” or being “normal”) are clustered around the zero point. The states with the most stereotypical “working class” dialects are highest on this dimension (with New York City at the top), while the states with the most distinctive ethnic (non-white) populations (Alaska, Hawaii, Florida, California) are the lowest on the chart.

Another way to view the regions that emerge through this analysis is by computing mean scores for the clusters from Figure 10. Having done this, it is possible to represent them graphically as in Figure 11.

Figure 11
Mean scores for degree of difference clusters



Evaluations of dialect regions

The results for the combination of MDS and K-Means cluster analysis for the Correctness and Pleasantness tasks are given in Figures 12 and 13.

The most immediately apparent feature in these charts is the fact that Massachusetts stands alone on both MDS graphs and forms its own cluster on both K-means cluster analyses. This is quite interesting given the fact that it clusters with other New England states on the degree of difference task. In other words, Bostonians don't think they sound very different from other New Englanders, yet they still evaluate their speech as distinct when given the opportunity. This in and of itself is not particularly novel; Oregonians do the same thing (Hartley 1996). What is

striking, however, is that the pattern of evaluation of the home area shows an interesting combination of linguistic security and linguistic insecurity for these respondents.

Figure 12
MDS analysis of correctness with K-means clusters

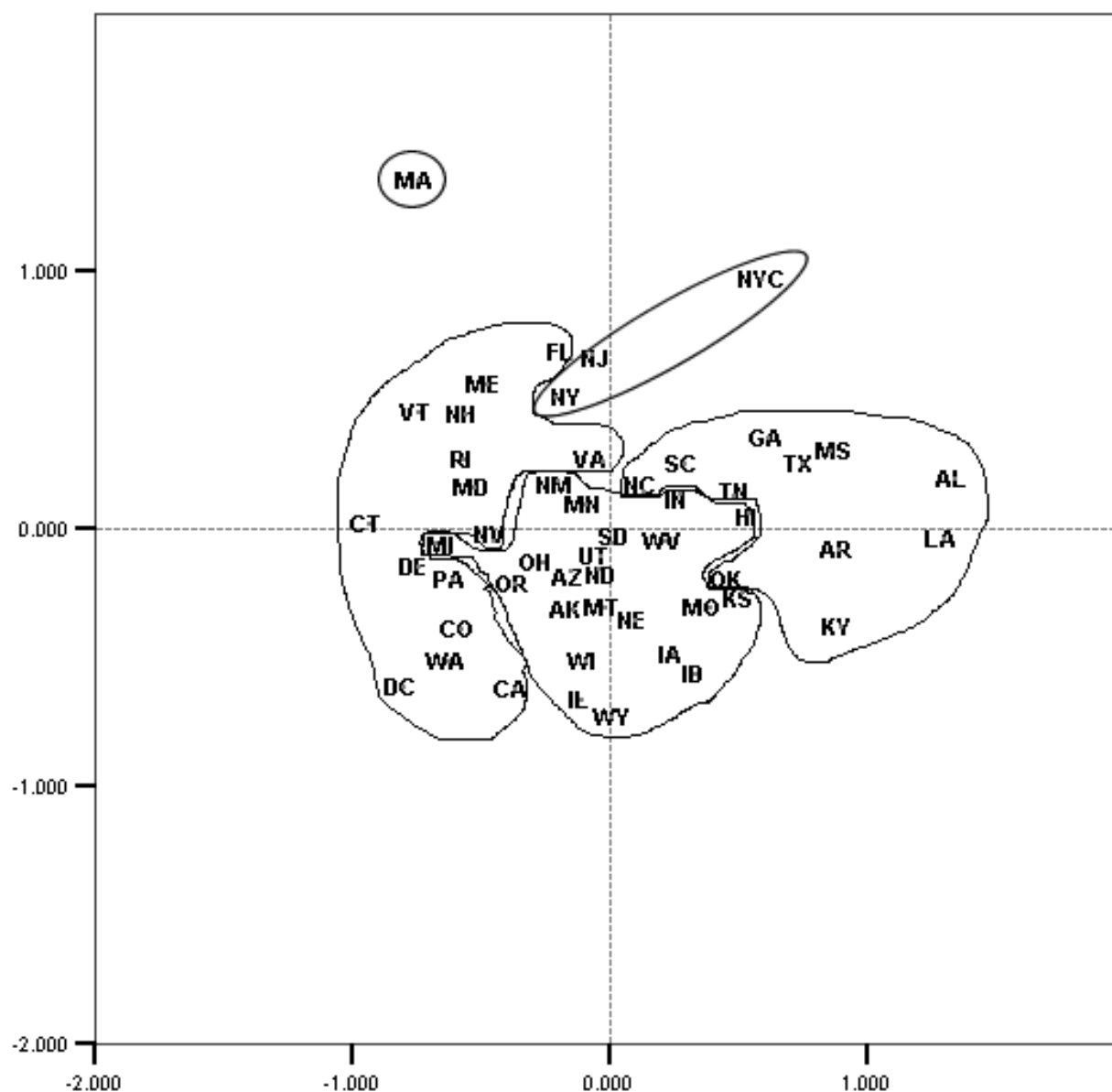
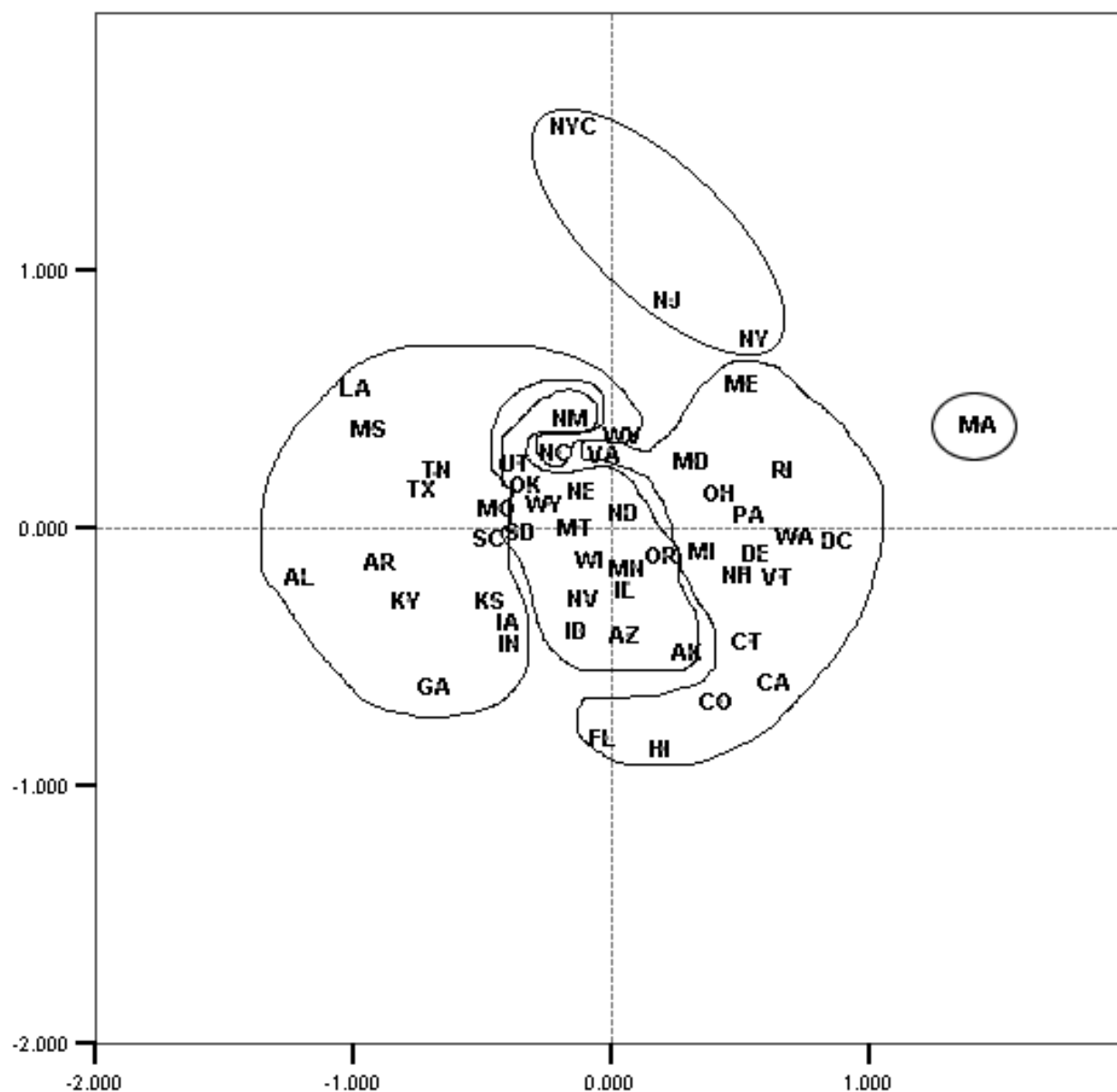


Figure 13
MDS analysis for pleasantness with K-means clusters



In past perceptual dialectology work, respondents from a Michigan, a linguistically secure area, rated the local area highest on the status variable (“correctness”), but allowed several other states to share in high ratings on the solidarity variable (“pleasantness”). In contrast, the residents of southern Indiana rated themselves somewhere in the middle of the “correctness” ratings but

highest for “pleasantness,” a pattern typically seen in linguistically insecure areas. Oregonian raters showed an even stronger sense of linguistic security by rating the local region highest on both “correctness” and “pleasantness” (Hartley and Preston 1999).

For both correctness and pleasantness ratings in this study, Massachusetts clearly stands alone on both the MDS and K-means cluster statistics. When mean scores are computed and compared for clusters, however, the results, as shown in Figures 14 and 15, are striking. The mean score for Massachusetts is higher than the mean score for any other cluster on both correctness and pleasantness ratings. This would seem to indicate that, like the Oregonian raters, Bostonians have a high degree of linguistic security.

Figure 14
Mean scores for correctness clusters

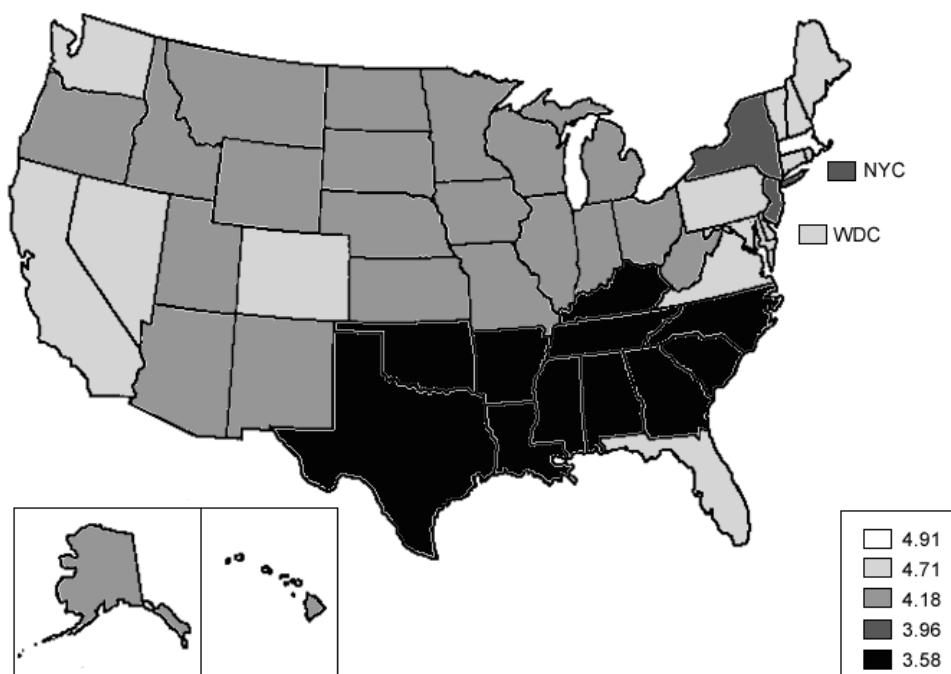
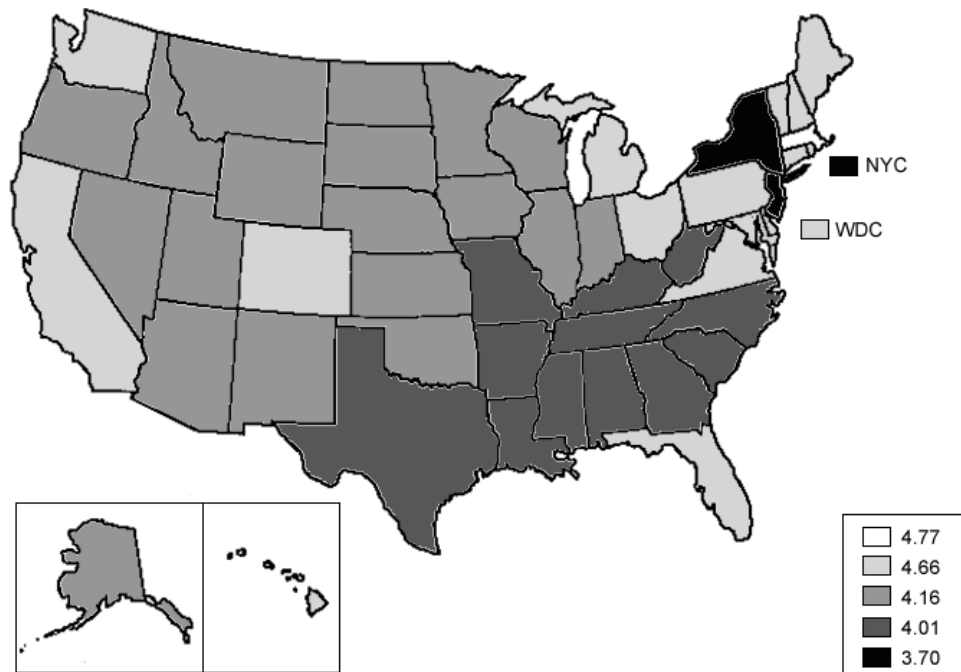


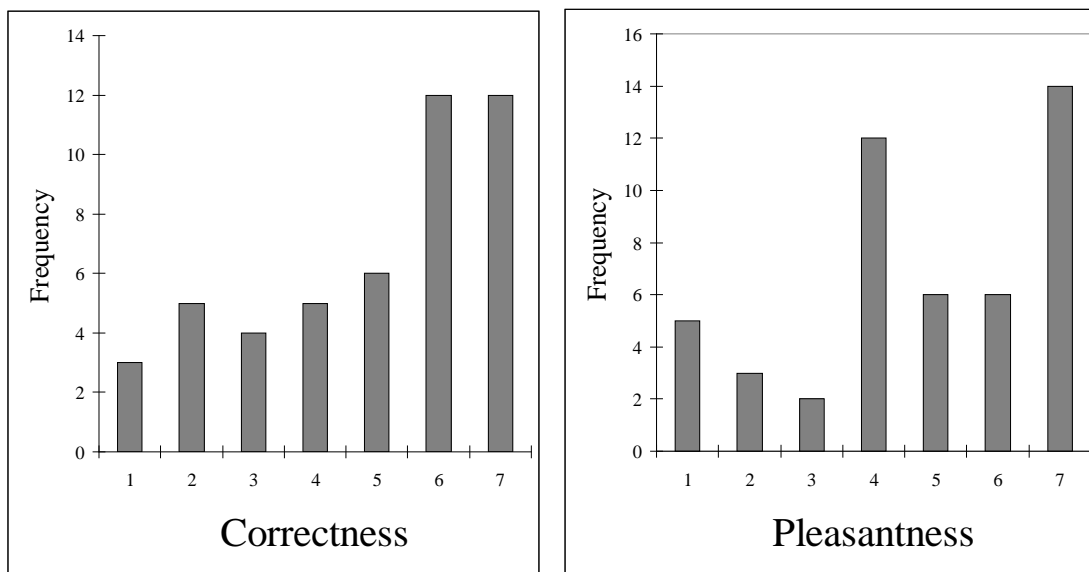
Figure 15
Mean scores for pleasantness clusters



An examination of the mean scores for individual states, however, does not quite support this conclusion. Unlike the Oregonians, who rated Oregon higher than any other state for both correctness and pleasantness, Bostonians rate Massachusetts quite high, but not highest,⁷ on “correctness,” which suggests that these raters are not entirely linguistically secure. At the same time, however, Massachusetts is rated high, but again not highest,⁸ on “pleasantness,” which suggests that they are not particularly linguistically insecure either. In addition, despite the high ratings for Oregon by the Oregonian raters, the home state clustered with other western and Midwestern states in the MDS and K-means cluster statistics (Hartley 1996). For Bostonians, no matter how many clusters are selected, Massachusetts stands alone for both correctness and pleasantness.

What is going on in the minds of Bostonian raters that causes them to set Massachusetts apart from other states on evaluative ratings (correctness and pleasantness) but not similarity ratings (degree of difference)? I suggest that it is the conflicting stereotypes of Boston that exist in American popular culture that these Bostonian raters have in mind when performing the evaluative tasks.

Figure 16
Histograms of correctness and pleasantness ratings for Massachusetts



If a respondent thinks of his or her fellow Bostonians primarily as educated elites, then he or she would certainly rate Massachusetts high on correctness, but perhaps not as high on pleasantness (depending on whether he or she identifies with this stereotype). If a respondent, in contrast, is thinking about working class Bostonians, he or she would likely rate Massachusetts lower on correctness, but perhaps higher on pleasantness, because of the covert prestige associated with this stereotype. A look at histograms of the correctness and pleasantness ratings for Massachusetts in Figure 16 suggests that there is, in fact, this split among Bostonian raters.

For correctness, about half of the respondents rate Massachusetts either 6 or 7, but there is a slight bimodal distribution produced because of ratings as low as 1, 2 and 3 for about a quarter of the respondents. The non-normal distribution of pleasantness ratings is even more striking. Almost as many respondents rate Massachusetts a 4 as a 7, and again there is a sizable minority that rate it as low as a 1. This kind of bimodal rating is similar to the ratings of New York City reported in Preston 1989.

It seems then that Bostonians (like Preston's New Yorkers) are not immune to the commonly held stereotypes, both positive and negative, of their local area. As a result of these conflicting images, they exhibit an interesting mix of linguistic security and linguistic insecurity through their evaluative ratings of their home area.

Finally, the desire to differentiate one's state from others is often demonstrated in perceptual dialectology studies as strongly through ratings of neighboring states as it is through the ratings of the home state. This is seen in Michigan through the substantially lower rating of Indiana for correctness compared to other Great Lakes states and in Oregon through the fairly low rating of California on the pleasantness task (Hartley and Preston 1999). A look at the ratings of the states in the "New York" region for Bostonian residents demonstrates a similar phenomenon. Figure 11 shows that the New York cluster of states is rated just slightly different than the cluster that includes Massachusetts. In terms of correctness (Figure 14), the New York cluster is in the middle of the ratings. It is in the pleasantness ratings, however, that Bostonians have the opportunity to best express their rivalry and antipathy towards all things New York. Figure 15 shows the New York cluster receives the lowest pleasantness rating of all clusters.

While there are many additional points that could be made about the perceptions of U.S. dialects for residents of eastern Massachusetts, particularly in terms of Bostonians views of non-local regions, the analysis here is focused primarily on the ways that the local area is perceived and evaluated. Given the common American stereotypes of Bostonians as either educated elites or working class descendants of immigrants, this study provides an interesting look at the ways that conflicting stereotypes of a region are internalized and referenced by residents of that area in the process of self-evaluation.

Notes

1. Since the vast majority of respondents in this study lived in or around Boston, the group will be collectively referred to throughout this article as “Bostonians,” with a realization that not all respondents would necessarily self-describe using this term.
2. Two groups that do draw a New York dialect area are residents of western New York and New York City (Preston 1986, 221-40). New Yorkers separate New York state from New York City into two distinct dialect areas, while Bostonians tend to group all of New York with New Jersey into a single area.
3. Multidimensional scaling (MDS) is a statistical technique which provides a visual representation of the pattern of proximities (i.e., similarities or distances) among a set of objects. Using a matrix of perceived similarities between items, MDS seeks to find the fewest number of dimensions into which the data can be mapped. It plots these items in this space, with items that are perceived to be very similar to each other placed near each other and those perceived to be very different from each other placed far away from each other on the plot. The MDS algorithm does not name the dimensions; it is up to the researcher to interpret the dimensions based on where each item falls along the various axes. Cluster analysis refers to a family of exploratory statistics which are used to sort different objects into groups so that the degree of association between two objects is maximal if they belong to the same group and minimal otherwise. K-Means analysis specifically can be used when the research has a hypothesis as to the number of groups, or clusters, into which the data fall. The researcher inputs the number of clusters into the statistical software, and the algorithm fits the data into that number of clusters. By experimenting with different numbers of clusters, the researcher

can determine which cluster grouping provides the most explanatory power for the particular data set.

4. It is interesting that Maine clusters with the other East Coast states, rather than being included with the New England states. Bostonians are clearly sensitive to the distinctiveness of the Maine dialect, and give Maine a lower mean rating (1.73) than either Washington D.C. (1.69) or Delaware (1.71).
5. While the respondents tended to separate the West and Midwest in their hand-drawn maps, the cluster here shows that on measures of difference of speech, there is no significant distinction in their minds for these states. In fact the cluster here lines up fairly neatly with the Midlands, North and West regions from Labov's (1991) work on vowel systems in the U.S.
6. Some of the early cultural geographical work on which perceptual dialectology was originally modeled (e.g. Gould and White 1974) in fact contained such political interpretations.
7. MA has a mean correctness score of 4.91, while CT (5.35), WA (4.98) and DE (4.94) are rated higher.
8. MA has a mean pleasantness score of 4.77, while VT (5.13), NH (4.83), RI (4.81), and PA (4.79) are rated higher.

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Author bio

Laura Hartley received her doctorate in Linguistics with a specialization in sociolinguistics from Michigan State University. She taught for seven years in the Intercultural Relations program of Lesley University. She recently moved to the Philadelphia area, where she is now affiliated with Eastern University.