

INTRODUCTION: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF SOUTHERNNESS

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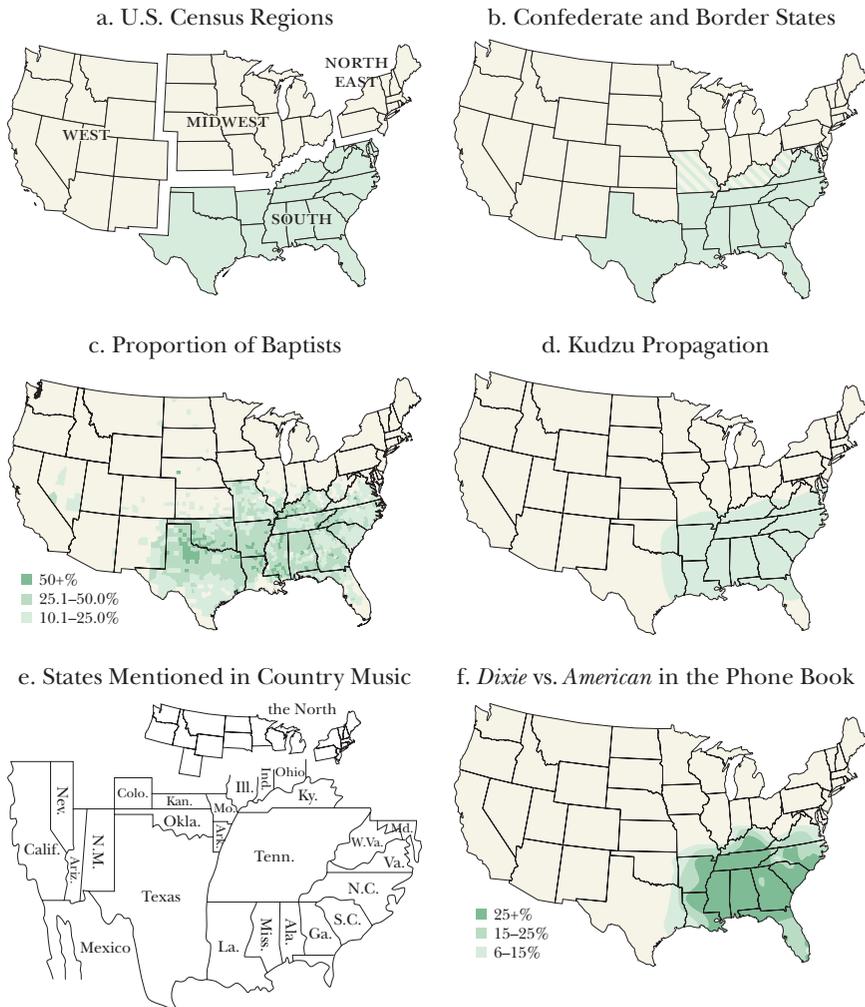
THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES is unique in that, as a subculture within the larger tapestry of Americanness, Southernness is something everyone knows something, everything, and nothing about. With or without real exposure to Southernness, a picture of the South has been constructed in the national imagination, and this image is at least bifurcated—it is *Gone with the Wind*, Southern belles, mint juleps, and front porch swings, and, simultaneously, it is *Beverly Hillbillies*, “unkempt, bearded, and barefoot rifle-toting hillbillies drinking homemade moonshine” (Harkins 2015, 421).

Within American dialectology, few varieties have been given as extensive treatment, in terms of both perception and production, as those associated with the American South (e.g., Kurath and McDavid 1961; Preston 1989; Bailey 1997; Feagin 2000; Wolfram 2003; Nagle and Sanders 2003). Much of this work has centered on production data, resulting in various understandings of that age-old question—where is the South? There might be many answers (see, e.g., J. S. Reed 1993), but there is some general consensus. Figure 1 shows four conceptualizations of the South that do not radically differ.

In terms of perceptions, the same bifurcation of stereotypes of the region at large exists with respect to speech—it’s pleasant, friendly, and homey, but incorrect, uneducated, and slow (e.g., Preston 1999; Hartley 1999; Cramer 2016)—for insiders and outsiders alike.

Similar questions may be asked about attitudes toward African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a component of Southern United States English (SUSE) but seldom are. Although negative attitudes to AAVE in general are well known and well studied, the detailed study of attitudes to SUSE-AAVE has barely been approached. We know that Northern, urban African Americans use such labels as “country” and “Bama” to disparage the language and lack of urban cultural knowledge of recent emigrants from the South, but we lack detailed information about the surely wide range of attitudes that exists within and without SUSE-AAVE communities toward those varieties. Tucker and Lambert (1969) is one of the few studies that begins the exploration of these possibilities.

FIGURE 1
Multiple Conceptualizations of the South



SOURCES: (a) "Census Regions and Divisions of the United States" (U.S. Census Bureau 2018); (b) "The United States: The Secession" (Ward, Prothero, and Leathes 1912, map 73); (c) "Baptists as a Percentage of All Residents, 2000" (Kilpinen 2006); (d) "Distribution of Kudzu in the Southeastern United States—1970" (Winberry and Jones 1973, 62); (e) "States Mentioned in Country-Music Lyrics" (Marsh 1977, 80); (f) "Dixie Entries as Percentage of American Entries" (J. S. Reed 1976, 932)

Although AAVE is an integral, long-standing part of SUSE, newer populations have added dimensions. Immigration of Spanish speakers to the area has now gone far beyond the Cuban population of Miami, and there are numerous studies of the varieties of English they are constructing in the Southern environment (e.g., Wolfram, Carter, and Moriello 2004). They, however, as well as Asian, Haitian, and other groups that now make up substantial parts of the Southern population, have not been an important part of studies of local and nonlocal attitudes to their emerging varieties.

Perhaps newer technology is as much to blame for the construction of opinion as the older popular culture vehicles cited above were. In the more global, highly connected world (e.g., Favell, Feldblum, and Smith 2007), where at least the potential for Americans to base perceptions in reality is greater, have those perceptions of SUSE changed? Do Southerners still devalue their own speech? Do non-Southerners still denigrate Southern varieties? Are there new ideologies in circulation that shatter the old? Is there a growing awareness of the cultural and ethnic diversity of the “New South”?

In the 2017 Linguistic Society of America’s Institute workshop on which the contributions in this special issue are based, we invited scholars from numerous subfields (e.g., perceptual dialectology, social psychology, sociophonetics) who have ongoing research interests in perceptions of Southernness to explore the nuances of the current and emerging perceptions of Southern varieties, and we bring these reflections, results, and suggestions to *American Speech*.

First, some words about “Changing Perceptions.” In fact, this special issue looks at perception from several different points of view. We have already mentioned insider-outsider attitudinal perception, and that is explored here in some detail in several contributions. We also use the term PERCEPTION to include identification as well as evaluation or attitude. What linguistic features (or frequency or combinations of features) are necessary for the identification of SUSE and subvarieties of it by nonspecialist hearers?

We also include, however, articles that are not specific studies of perception in either sense but involve instead changes within the target itself. When languages change, for whatever reason, the stage is set for changing perceptions, although the latter may often outlive the elements involved in their generation. The history of a variety and its subvarieties, therefore, is an important consideration in any account of perceptions of it.

In some cases, such changes result from fluctuations in the demography of the South (e.g., the enormous growth of Hispanic groups); in others, they are changes not in the populations but in the focus of scholarship, for example, more recently focused on subgroups of SUSE subvarieties seldom considered in older research (e.g., Ocracoke Island speech, Lumbee English).

We also include newer methodological trends as an aspect of changing perceptions. How we study the perception of varieties with increasingly sophisticated and innovative techniques in implicit attitude studies, folk linguistics, perceptual dialectology, and acoustic manipulation in experimental settings and with more detailed investigations of discourses about language variety has allowed verification and expansion of the findings from older attitude studies as well as additional insights and even modifications of those earlier studies.

Finally, we include in our concept of changing perceptions different notions of what to do with perceptions, particularly evaluative ones, once we have uncovered them and given them scholarly treatment. The importance of language beliefs in social, educational, legal, and employment settings, to name only a few of the very prominent areas of concern, is an essential part of perception studies of any sort, and the reader will find that theme running throughout this special issue, both implicitly and explicitly.

The issue begins with Walt Wolfram's (2018) characterization of research on both emerging and less well-studied groups in the South and the changes that have come about within even long-established and well-studied ones. His examples of Lumbee (Native American) English and Hispanic English in North Carolina focus on the internal changes in these varieties, particularly how they differ from and adapt to surrounding majority norms, setting the stage for closer looks at the internal perception and even identification of these varieties. The work he reports on African American varieties looks at them in the specific settings of their speech communities and adds the potential for perception studies in general of the more recent understanding that such varieties are hardly monolithic, not only in the United States, but even within one state or community (e.g., Wolfram and Kohn 2015).

Kirk Hazen (2018) examines the changes emerging in Appalachian English in West Virginia. As Wolfram does in his article, Hazen questions how evaluative and other perceptual issues will or will not be maintained in the face of changing norms. This article specifically considers how well sociolinguistic patterns of variation in West Virginia align with the relatively uniform perception (among outsiders) of the state and its residents as Southern. As one might expect, the perceptions and production of Southernness for West Virginians are not so uniform.

Paul Reed (2018) examines the issue of internal attitudes toward and beliefs about Appalachian English but ties those perceptual factors to ones closely connected to changes in production. He shows that locals whose sense of place is strongest are least likely to move away from more traditional variety norms and illustrates this connection with questionnaires, interviews, and detailed studies of phonological production data.

Elaine Wonhee Chun (2018) looks at the evaluations of *redneck* based on discussions of a YouTube video that questioned racism in the South. She demonstrates the associations of the term with other symbolic factors (e.g., the Confederate flag) and shows, as is argued by many other contributors to this issue, the rhetorical and linguistic complexity of talk about language in the South.

Jennifer Cramer, Susan Tamasi, and Paulina Bounds (2018) ask us to step back from perception and consider the interpretive strategies and underlying beliefs nonlinguists use in their characterizations of language variety by outlining a model based on an analogy with gravitational forces. They illustrate the validity of the model and its emphasis on competing beliefs even within an individual by focusing on granularity in perceptual dialect studies of insider characterizations of Kentucky.

Dennis Preston (2018) emphasizes the methodological approaches taken to SUSE perceptual studies in general (or “language regard”) by looking at the underlying cognitive frameworks involved, particularly the distinctions between implicit and explicit responses. This article also explores in some detail the value of closely analyzed respondent interview characterizations of SUSE, or “talk about talk.”

Barbara Johnstone (2018) illustrates an interesting methodological technique seldom used in sociolinguistic and perception studies—variety imitation (but see Preston 1992 and Evans 2002). Her data from a Pittsburgher who imitates his concept of SUSE is both ideologically revealing, perhaps particularly in its “characterology” (i.e., the use of a specific character type by an imitator), and linguistically detailed in its meticulous description of her respondent’s use of his idea of SUSE features.

Anne Charity Hudley and Christine Mallinson (2018) conclude the volume by taking into careful consideration that last part of our concern about perception outlined above—what to do with it after we know about it. In addition to raising the always contentious issue of “what to do with” so-called nonstandard varieties, they reframe this question in terms of social justice and challenge linguists who focus on SUSE and its subvarieties to become more proactive not only in their promotion of social justice with regard to language variety, but also in their own classroom and educational behaviors. They walk the walk by providing exemplary techniques for carrying this message into schools and other settings.

In all, this collection represents our current understanding of the perceptions, broadly defined, that exist with respect to SUSE and its many established and emerging subvarieties. The pieces together paint a picture of emerging detail that illustrates the values of focused community investigation, a constant search for methodological improvement, and the importance of social and personal action.

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