

## Language and Place: Social Perception of Regional American English

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This study examines how pre-conceived notions of place affect social evaluations of speakers, drawing from work on language attitudes (e.g. Lambert et al 1960), speech perception (e.g. Clopper & Pisoni 2006), and perceptual dialectology (e.g. Preston 1989). The current study seeks to better understand the relationship between language, social evaluations, and place associations by asking what has a greater effect on social evaluations: linguistically encoded place information (regional accent) or external place information (being told where the person is from).

The experiment consisted of a matched guise listening task, a free-listing task, and a perceptual dialectology map task (N=40). For the listening task, I played clips of speakers from Mid-Atlantic, Midlands, and Southern dialect areas (Nationwide Speech Corpus, Clopper & Pisoni 2006), asking listeners to rate speakers along eleven social qualities such as accented-unaccented, city-country, polite-impolite, etc. Speakers were said to be from New York, NY; Birmingham, AL; and Columbus, OH, as seen in the table below (*italics reflect mismatch between real/told place*).

Real place	Told place
Mid-Atlantic	New York, NY
Midlands	<i>New York, NY</i>
	Columbus, OH
	<i>Birmingham, AL</i>
Southern	Birmingham, AL

This task determined if, e.g., Midlands speakers said to be from New York were rated the same as speakers who were actually from this dialect area and if, furthermore, a single Midlands speaker was rated the same when said to be from the three places. In other words: does linguistically encoded place information (real place) or external place information (told place) affect social evaluations more?

The map task and free-listing task showed strong associations of accentedness with Birmingham, and unaccentedness with Columbus. In addition, many participants listed Birmingham as “country” and New York as “city.” A linear mixed effects regression run on listening task data indicates that speakers said to be from Birmingham were heard as accented ( $p < .05$ ), regardless of where the actual speaker was from. Additionally, speakers said to be from Birmingham were rated as country ( $p < .05$ ) and those said to be from New York were rated as city ( $p < .05$ ), regardless of where the speaker was from. This suggests that listeners did bring in some pre-conceived notions of place during the listening task.

However, there were speaker-specific effects as well. In particular, one Midlands speaker rated as accented in all three told place conditions was consistently uprated by listeners when said to be from Birmingham, while another speaker rated as unaccented in all three conditions was consistently downrated by listeners when said to be from Birmingham. These results may reflect an interaction between linguistically encoded place information (regional accent) and external place information (told place). Because listeners expected accented speech from Birminghamians, but not New Yorkers or Columbusites, they preferred accented speakers said to be from Birmingham and unaccented speakers said to be from New York or Columbus.

Thus while listeners relied more on external place information for some ratings, they seemed to use both types of place information in the listening task, with individual speaker results suggesting an interaction between external and linguistically encoded place information.