

Sourdoughs in the City: Towards an Understanding of Regional Variation in Anchorage, Alaska

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Sociolinguistic accounts of language variation within urban environments generally assume that urban areas are effectively linguistically monolithic, with variation within an urban area better explained by social factors such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and so on (Labov 1972; Chambers & Trudgill 1998) with the adoption, diffusion, and accommodation of linguistic variables within urban contexts consistent with such socially definable features (e.g., Kerswill & Williams 2000). However, classic interpretations of what classifies language varieties vis-à-vis urbanization have more recently been problematized and pushed beyond a static and normative “monoglot ideology” (Bloomaert 2010: 165), with suggestions that language variation in urban environments is best explained by a non-normative and fluid schematic of metrolingualism—one that resists traditional assumptions of language use and its ties to specific sociocultural classifications (Pennycook 2012).

We propose to test the validity of claims that urban areas are or are not underlyingly linguistically uniform by developing a linguistic map of all of the neighborhoods of Anchorage, Alaska. Founded as a tent city just over 100 years ago, Anchorage has developed into an urban port city where English is the dominant language, but that English is in contact with about 95 other languages, including 19 Native Alaskan ones. Through our analysis we intend to move towards an understanding whether (1) urban areas are indeed linguistically uniform and that any variable can be best explained by social factors rather than by region as Labov and others suggest; (2) urban areas are linguistically differentiated based on neighborhood among other social factors; or, (3) as Pennycook and others argue, urban linguistic variation transcends static constructs of place and occurs in unexpected spaces.

We propose to test the validity of claims that urban areas are or are not underlyingly linguistically uniform by developing a linguistic map of all of the neighborhoods of Anchorage, Alaska. In this first phase of the study, we present data from 40 speakers representing two Anchorage neighborhoods (Fairview and Government Hill). We present a qualitative frame for syntactic distribution and quantitative analysis of phonological variants of the Third Dialect Shift. Our findings suggest that residents of these neighborhoods display different vowel production. Although it is, of course, impossible to tell from this study whether these differences are primarily the result of a sort of dialect isogloss separating for these neighborhoods, or that residents of both neighborhoods do speak the same “Anchorage English” but in ways that reflect differences in social categorization between the neighborhoods, it does verify that there is a difference of some sort to be investigated.