

## Perceiving and Placing Voices at the Border

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The *placing voices* task of perceptual dialectology (Preston 1999), wherein respondents listen to voices and assign them regional origin points, is an area of research in sociophonetics that has been given little attention. Some research (Preston 1993; Purnell, Idsardi, and Baugh 1999; Fridland, Bartlett, and Kreuz 2004) maintains that subjects do well with this task, but others have found that respondents perform poorly (Williams, Garrett, and Coupland 1999; Clopper and Pisoni 2004). This poster examines how well Louisvillians, located at the border between Southern and Midland varieties (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006), identify voices from their own town.

In a web-based survey, participants listened to speech samples taken from a reality television show called *Southern Belles: Louisville* and were asked to pinpoint on a map of a small region of the United States (with Kentucky at its center) where they believed the speaker to be from. The original goal of this data collection was to aid in understanding regional identity in Louisville, and as such, the samples featured several instances of /ai/ monophthongization, with the indication that Louisvillians who perceive Louisville as Southern could select Louisville as the point of origin for the speaker. Stimuli included one sample from each of the five main characters from the show, as well as five filler samples, also from the show but from non-Louisvillians. Each target sound sample was controlled for length (22-30 seconds) and number of /ai/ tokens (15-20).

It became apparent, however, that Louisvillians had a great deal of difficulty with this task. In order to determine which speaker was perceived to be from closest to Louisville, mean distances and mean log distances from Louisville were calculated for each speaker. While mean distances can reveal *physical* distance from Louisville, the mean logs are intended to determine *perceived* miles, drawing on the Weber-Fechner law, which suggests that there is a relationship between the physical and perceived magnitudes of stimuli (Longo and Lourenco 2007). Therefore, mean distances from Louisville that are higher are not perceived to be as far away as they actually are.

Even considering the Weber-Fechner law, the results were abysmal. The target speaker who was selected as being from closest to Louisville was given a mean distance of 226.6 miles (log distance of 125.7 miles), and the selected points were seemingly randomly distributed across the given region. Indeed, one of the filler voices was actually placed closer to Louisville than any of the target voices. The problem, it seems, is with the task itself. It is difficult, for example, to determine what linguistic features actually conditioned the responses. It is possible that the results suggest that this traditional marker of Southern identity is not clearly linked to Louisville for these participants. But it is also possible that respondents selected points of origin at random. In addition to discussing the results of this specific study, therefore, this poster also explores the methods used in the task and examines other possible ways to constrain this task to yield more appropriate results.

## References

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