

“It’s Complicated”: Perceptions of Dialect Southernness in Deer Park, Texas

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Perceptual dialectology researchers have reported that in “draw-a-map” tasks focused on non-linguists’ perceptions of dialect regions, the South is one of the most commonly identified regions in the United States (Preston 1986). Previous research suggests that most subjects will identify at least one southern dialect region, and many subjects further differentiate the South into smaller core and peripherally southern subregions. As a state with a “complex” and “complicated” relationship with the South (Johnstone 1999), Texas is often grouped with the West or Southwest or identified as its own region (Hartley 1999, Hartley 2005, Lance 1999, Niedzielski and Preston 1999, Preston 1986).

This study explores perceptual notions of “southernness” by examining perspectives in one East Texan community regarding internal differentiation within the South. 90 subjects from Deer Park, Texas, completed an online demographic questionnaire and survey which asked them to indicate which states they considered part of the southern dialect region, to identify any smaller subregions within the South, and to select the one state they considered most southern in dialect. At a more local level, subjects were asked to compare their city to the nearby cities of Pasadena and Houston, which differ from Deer Park in size, ethnic diversity, median income, and education level.

The results align with previous research which has suggested that southernness is for many subjects not categorical but a matter of degree (Hall-Lew and Stephens 2011, Johnstone 1999, Reed 1991): while nearly 90% of subjects included Texas in the South, Texas was chosen as the *most* southern state by only 8% of respondents.

The subregions within the South that subjects identified were heavily influenced by their local point of reference and by notions of Texan distinctiveness: Deer Park subjects frequently distinguished between the Southwest and Southeast, isolated Texas or Texas plus one other state as a unique dialect region, or subdivided the state of Texas into smaller dialect regions. These subregions within the South also differed across age groups: subjects in the youngest age group were more likely to single out Texas as its own region and to distinguish between urban and rural areas in the South.

Qualitative analysis of subject commentary on the cities of Deer Park, Pasadena, and Houston highlights salient distinctions between the Deer Park community and surrounding communities, particularly regarding ethnic diversity and “urbanness,” and suggests that subjects are able to engage with the concept of southernness at a more local level than has been explored in previous perceptual dialectology research.

These results lend further support to previous research which has argued that responses to perceptual dialectology tasks are sensitive to scale and that distinctions which are salient at the local level may be obscured in studies which examine dialect differences at the national level (Bucholtz et al. 2007, Evans 2013). By centering the task on one dialect region, this study allows for a more fine-grained understanding of the South as understood by members of a peripherally southern community.

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