

The Perception of Oklahoma Speech

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There have been only two intense periods of work on Oklahoma English: 1) Recordings made by Van Riper in the 1950s as part of LAUSC (housed in the Library of Congress, but as yet unanalyzed) and 2) investigations done by Bailey, Tillery, and Wikle in the Survey of Oklahoma Dialects in the early 1990s. Neither project focused on language attitudes among or about Oklahomans, but we will review preliminary studies of attitude that lay the groundwork for further investigation.

We first present a study of Oklahoma self-perception in which college student respondents were asked to what extent they felt themselves to be typical Oklahomans and to identify Oklahomans' general behavior and then their speech as most like a 1) Midwesterner, 2) Southerner, 3) Westerner, or 4) Southwesterner. These same respondents were asked to name traits of a typical Oklahoman and if they could recognize Oklahoma (or even regional Oklahoma) speech. Oddly, the respondents did not find themselves to be typical Oklahomans, and found Oklahomans to be more like Southerners than any of the other choices presented, despite Bailey et al.'s finding that Southern speech is receding considerably in the state, except for a few markers such as "fixin-to."

We then analyze hand-drawn maps of dialect areas of the US produced by Oklahomans, some done more than twenty years ago and several more done recently; in most cases, Oklahoma itself is singled out, although maps done by respondents from other areas seldom identify Oklahoma as a distinct dialect region.

Finally, we examine ethnographic interviews with speakers from rural areas in southcentral Oklahoma, who focused on the degree to which people in Oklahoma who leave small towns are capable of and/or do change their speech, although a number of other attitudinal themes (e.g., local solidarity) will be shown to have emerged.

References

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