Oklahoma Perceptual Dialectology

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Abstract.

This study presents an analysis of perceptual dialect maps drawn by 88 long-time Oklahoma residents. Participants described where/how people speak English differently within the state. By compiling data using a GIS, we created aggregate maps of labels and their associated regions. Categories of labels include Negative Attitude, Southern, Rural, Neutral/Standard Language, Twang, and Drawl. Negative Attitude aligns with Southern and Rural, while Neutral/Standard Language centers on urban areas. Twang and Drawl are associated with the south/southeast. Interestingly, Twang is also present in the cities. These findings suggest an urban/rural split among Oklahomans with regard to language variation in their state.

Introduction and Background.

This project examines data from an investigation into the perceptions that Oklahomans have about the varieties of English spoken in their state. The settlement of Oklahoma was fairly recent and rapid, and the new residents came from many different cultural regions of the United States and abroad, leading to increased language and dialect variety within the state. Because of this, Oklahoma is well suited for the study of language attitudes. Following a common method from the field of perceptual dialectology, 88 participants were given a blank map of Oklahoma

and asked to indicate where they think people speak English differently and to label how they would describe the speech in those regions. These labels were submitted to a content analysis in order to determine what categories surfaced. The maps were digitized and analyzed using a Geographic Information System program to create aggregate maps which show the regions associated with particular categories of labels. The regions which were particularly salient include the southeastern corner, the area surrounding the major cities Tulsa and Oklahoma City, and a geographically salient area known as the "Panhandle." The aggregate map of regions labeled with negative attitude terms aligns with the regions labeled as southern and rural likely due to the popular notion that Southerners are uneducated and incorrect in their language choices (e.g. Preston 1996). The regions labeled as "normal" are centered on urban areas because these are the seat of the local standard which is accordingly less stigmatized. The labels "twang" and "drawl" are associated with the south and southeast parts of the state, but interestingly also present in the cities. These results reveal a range of Oklahomans' perceptions about language within the state and suggest the ways they divide the linguistic landscape. Such beliefs and perceptions are important components of the linguistic identity of people in Oklahoma and, as such, are likely to contribute to the linguistic decisions people continually make, even nonconscious ones.

In this study, I will demonstrate here how individuals' perceptions of a group of people directly influences their perception of the language used by that group. For example, the map of regions labeled with negative attitude terms aligns with the regions labeled as southern and rural likely due to a popular notion that Southerners are uneducated and incorrect in their language choices (e.g., Preston 1996). The regions labeled as "normal" are centered on urban areas because these are the seat of the local standard which is accordingly less stigmatized.

Although language variety does not correlate with intelligence, there are "popular associations of certain varieties of English with professional and intellectual competence" (Preston 1998: 139). This project analyzes non-linguist perceptions of the varieties of English in Oklahoma to determine how their perceptions of regional groups influence their perceptions of the language varieties spoken by those groups. Oklahoma is a natural laboratory for dialect contact, language variation and change, and language attitude (Southard 1993:234). This is largely due to its unique settlement history. Oklahoma became a state on the sixteenth of November 1907, and was the 46th admitted to the union. Much of Oklahoma was initially reserved for the "Five Civilized Tribes," who were relocated to Oklahoma during the Trail of Tears. However, white settlers later claimed much of this land during several major land runs. These land runs and lottery settlements caused a very rapid influx of immigrants from across the United States. Oklahoma later became a major agricultural center, particularly in the areas of cattle and wheat. The discovery of oil and natural gas in Oklahoma also lead to massive economic growth. The construction of several military installations in Oklahoma, including several Air Force Bases (Altus, Fort Sill, Tinker, and Vance) have had an economic impact on the state. Each of these factors has led to an accumulation of immigrants from across the United States (U.S. Census Bureau) and have no doubt contributed to its linguistic diversity (e.g., Bailey et al. 1993).

Oklahoma is located in the center of the United States, and it is bounded by Texas (south), Colorado and New Mexico (west), Kansas (north), and Missouri and Arkansas (east). It is difficult to place Oklahoma in any particular region because it shares characteristics with many. For example, Oklahoma is largely composed of flat plains and agriculture fields, similar to the terrain of the Midwest. It is also associated, however, with Western themes like cowboys, Native

Americans, and oil. Additionally, many of the immigrants during the land run brought elements of Southern heritage with them when they migrated to the state (Bakos 2013, Southard 1993).

The population density of Oklahoma varies throughout the state. Figure 1 shows population density estimates from 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau). The most densely populated areas surround the urban centers of Oklahoma City and Tulsa. The most sparsely populated area is predominately in the northwest and the geographically salient area commonly known as the "panhandle".

Figure 1: Population Density Map of Oklahoma (U.S. Cenus Bureau)

Darker regions indicate more densly populated
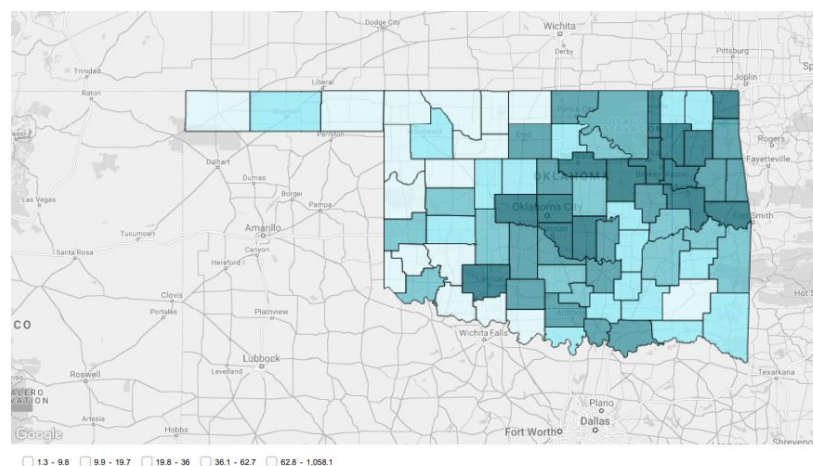
Perceptual dialectology is a study of how nonlinguists perceive variation in language. It is not related to the structure or mechanics of speech, but rather interested in the beliefs associated with particular dialects. One method of studying nonlinguists beliefs is by asking participants to indicate where and how people sound different on blank maps. These maps are then layered to create aggregate perceptual dialect maps.

This study will reveal a range of Oklahomans' perceptions about language within their state and suggest the ways they divide the linguistic landscape. These beliefs and perceptions are important components of the linguistic identity of people in Oklahoma and, as such, are likely to

contribute to the linguistic decisions people make. This project makes a contribution to ongoing research on language in Oklahoma by surveying nonlinguists' beliefs about language in the state and demonstrating how Oklahomans conceive of linguistic variation there.

Methods.

This project follows a common method in the field of Perceptual Dialectology (Preston 1986, Preston & Howe 1987, and Evans 2011) to survey the distribution of language varieties within a region. Responses were collected from 88 long-term Oklahoma residents.
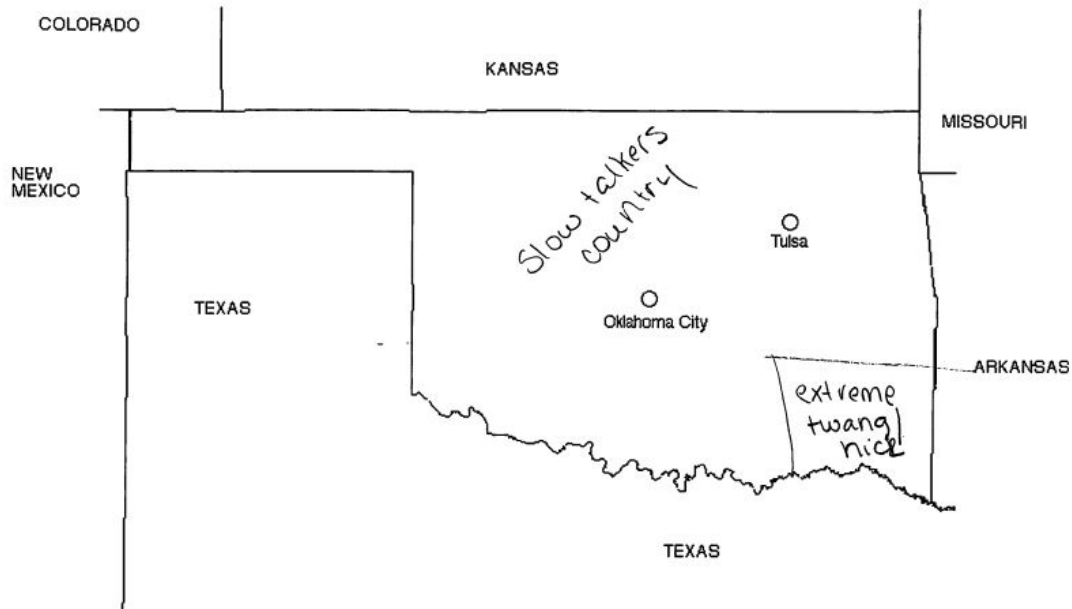
Map Collection.

In this study, participants were given a blank map of Oklahoma and asked to:

1. "Draw a line around places where you think people's English sounds different."

2. "Next, write down what you'd call that way of talking, if you can think of a label for it."

Using this method, 88 respondent maps of Oklahoma were collected. An example of a respondent's map is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: One respondent's hand-drawn map

This procedure was used uniformly for collecting maps to ensure that the results were not affected by differing research protocols. While different participants may have had varying interpretations of the tasks, they were all at least asked the same questions.

Qualitative Labels.

The qualitative labels were subjected to a content analysis, a process of examining patterns in a systematic and replicable fashion. First, a unique identification was given each map, beginning with "OKPD0001" and concluding with "OKPD0088."

We extracted the descriptive labels from each of the hand-drawn maps and organized them into 28 categories. The extraction of the labels ensured our qualitative analysis was not based on any spatial patterns.

The most relevant categories that emerged are shown in Table 1. These categories these categories were judged relevant because they were the most frequent responses or they displayed an interesting geographic salience when we later created a map. For example, the Negative Attitude category had only 16 responses compared to the 43 of the Southern category, but the extreme distinction in the Southeast corner requires more investigation. A complete list of categories can be found in the appendix.

Table 1: Most relevant label categories

Category	Description	Example
Rural	Includes terms that indicate rural population of vegetation	"farms", "small towns", and includes all "Country" labels
Southern	indicates the use of the term/phrase southern	"southern", "southern sounding", southern accent"
Negative Attitude	any term which is *most commonly* used with a negative connotation	"redneck", "hillbilly", "hick"
Nonspecific	indicates that people recognize noticeably similar or differing speech but do NOT reference specific language elements	"accent", "no dialect", "same", "talk different", "similar"
Twang	using the word twang in the description	"twang", "twangy"
Drawl	any term or phrase that indicates the use of a drawl	"drawl", "drawling", "draw" (sic)

Each category was given a unique code (0-28), and these were applied to the hand-drawn maps. These codes were created hierarchically so that some categories are nested under others. For example, all labels coded Southern are also coded for Region. A demographic of this hierarchy can be found in the appendix.

Additionally, each area on the hand-drawn map was given its own unique code, beginning with 1 in the upper left portion of the state (the panhandle) and spiraling in a clockwise direction (Preston 1986, Preston & Howe 1987, and Evans 2011). For example, the term "Twang" written in the upper left region of the state would be coded 1.3 with 1 representing the region and 3 representing the label category. An example of a completely coded map is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Coded Map
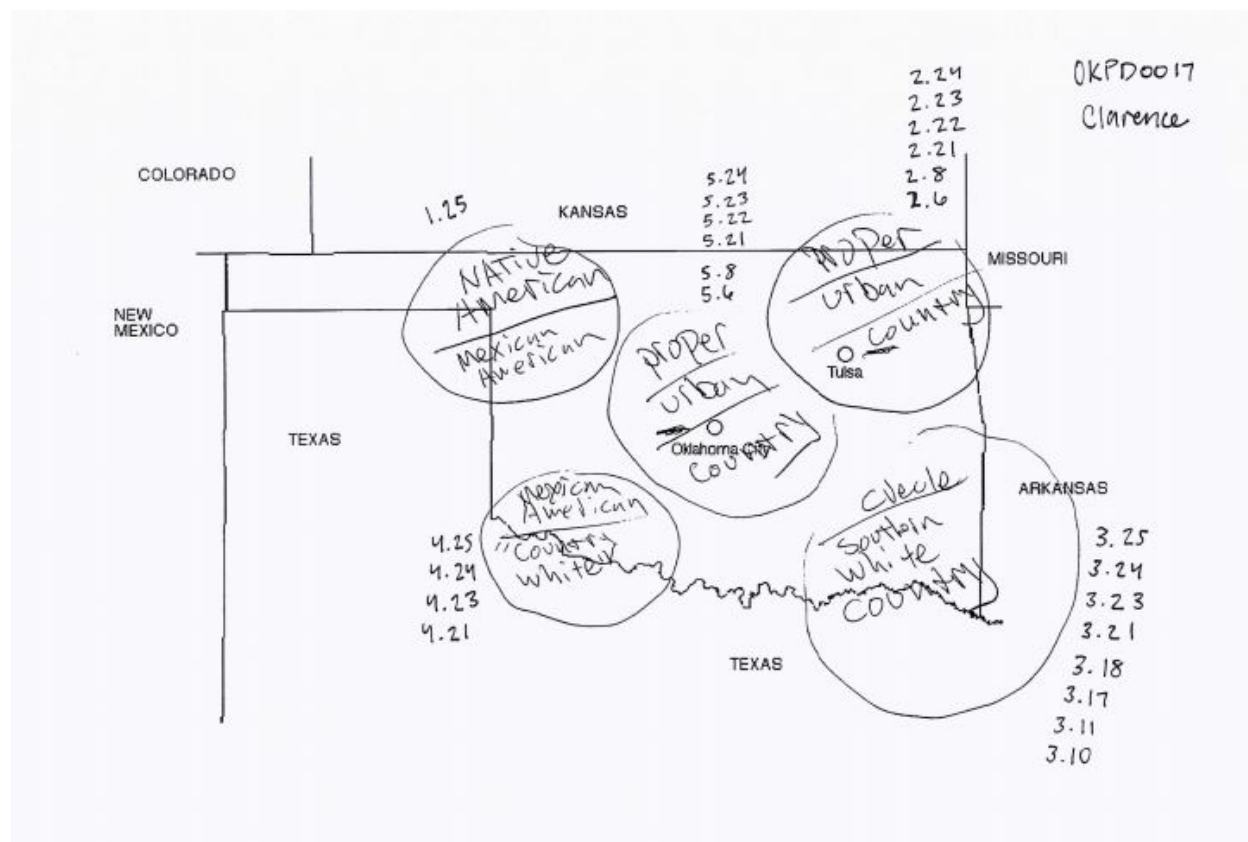
Geographic Information System.

Following this, aggregate maps for specific categories and areas were made using the Geographic Information System, QGIS. This process is rooted in the ability to identify spatial locations and organize layers of information into visual representations in order to show patterns and relationships in areal data.

The coded maps were scanned and georeferenced to a basemap of Oklahoma, which allowed accurate overlap the individual maps. The hand-drawn shapes on each map were used to create polygons in QGIS. Each polygon had 3 attributes: the map identification, the spatial identification, and the qualitative label identification. If more than one qualitative label was indicated for a single geographic area, each one was considered as a separate response. For example, if one area was labeled with both "Rural" and "Drawl," there would be two identical polygon shapes coded for each label. This method is problematic because it allows a respondent who gives more labels to be overrepresented, but it allowed us to consider all labels rather than being forced to select only one label from a respondent who provided several. With these aligned maps and polygons, aggregate maps were created to show the regions associated with specific labels.

<div align="center">

Results.

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In all, we collected 88 maps from long-term residents of Oklahoma. The total count of labels is 1186. The division of these labels can be found in the appendix below. From the aggregate maps, the regions which were particularly salient include the southeastern corner, the areas surrounding the major cities of Tulsa and Oklahoma City, and a geographically salient feature known as the "Panhandle."

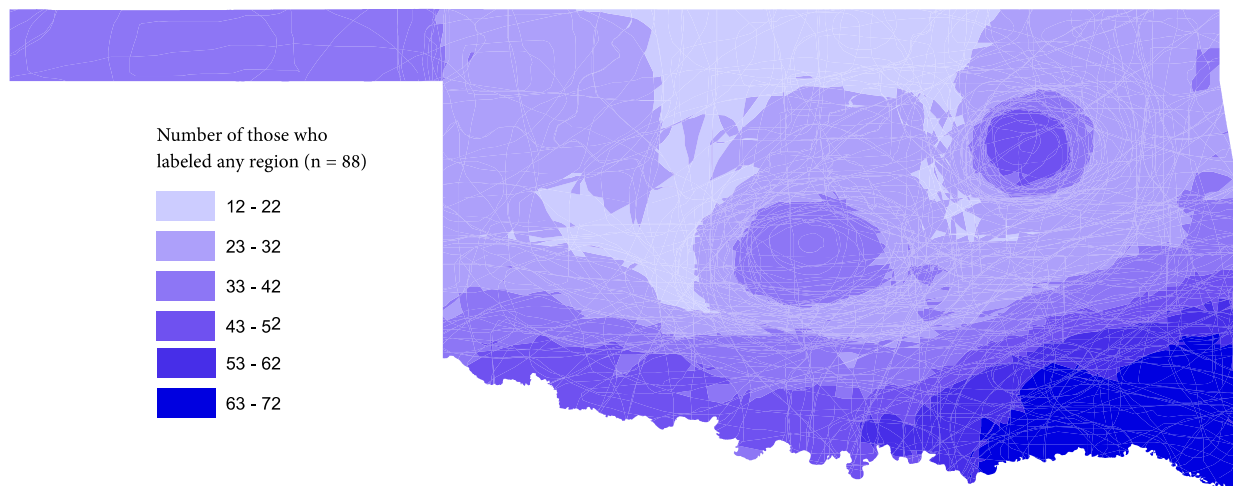**Figure 4: Composite Map of All Responses**

Figure 4 is a composite map of all responses (389), and it indicates the overlap of each area

where participates noted that "people's English sounds different." The darker regions of the

Southeast corner, the southern border with Texas, the Panhandle, Tulsa, and Oklahoma City

indicate the increased number of labels given these areas. In fact, to help orient the respondents,

Tulsa and Oklahoma City were marked on the blank maps of Oklahoma, which may have caused

some to gravitate towards indicating these regions. Figure 2 shows, however, these areas are the

most densely populated areas of the state and the participants were very likely aware of them

without this map-inducement. The Southeast corner shows even more salience, likely due to

stigmatization of this region, which is commonly known as "Little Dixie" (Bakos 2013). The

salience of the panhandle is very likely due to its geopgraphical isolation from the rest of the

state.

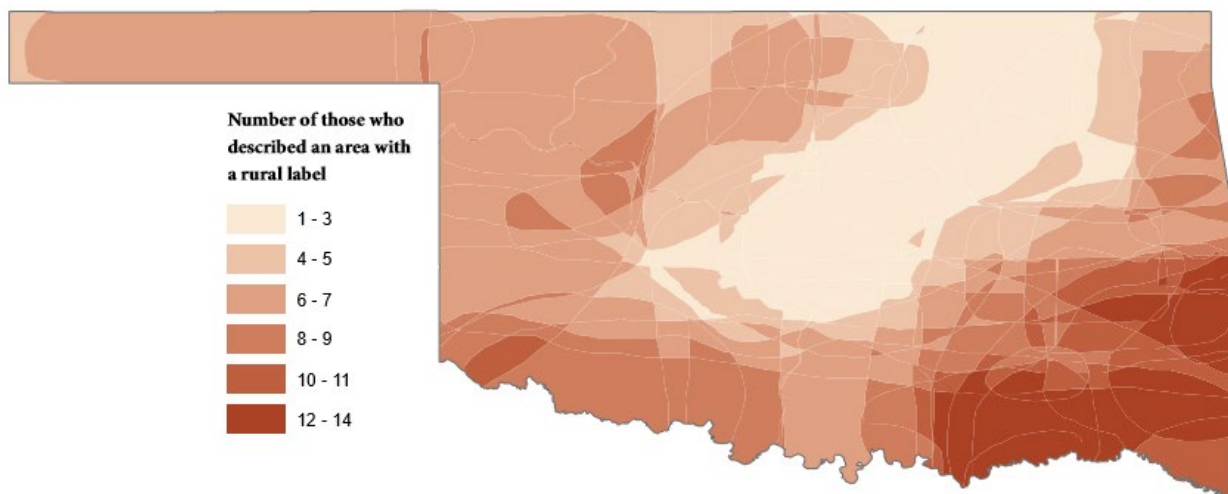**Figure 5. Composite Map of All Indications of Rural**

Figure 5 is a composite map of each time a participant indicated "Rural." There were 48

responses (12.34% of all labels) indicating rurality, including labels such as "farms," "small

towns," and all "Country" labels. The distinct areas in this map include the southern border and

especially the southeast corner. The large number of responses in this category implies that many

Oklahomans relate rurality and speech patterns.

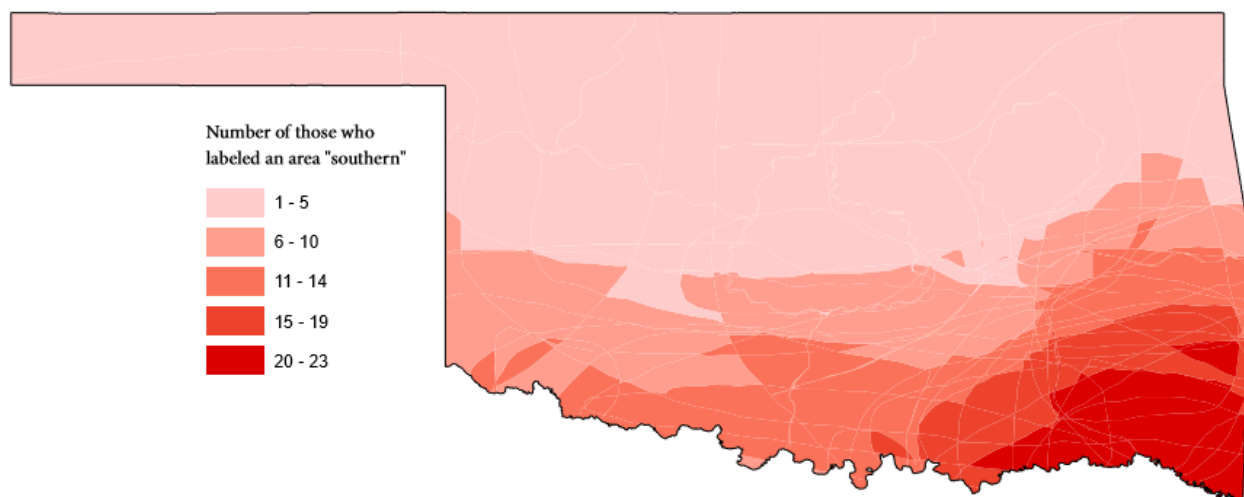**Figure 6. Composite Map of All Indications of Southern**

Figure 6 is a composite map of the participants' indication of "Southern." There were 43

responses (11.05% of all labels) indicating southernness, including "southern," "southern

sounding," and "southern accent." Unsurprisingly, the southern border shows more salience than

the northern half of the state, and the southeast corner is especially salient. Here too, the vast

number of responses which indicates southernness implies that many Oklahomans relate

southernness and speech patterns. This may be the result of participants associating the southern

half of the state with the southern states due to its close proximity to them as well as some

knowledge of the settlement history of Oklahoma. Folk linguistic knowledge of the southernness

of speech in the areas is well-documented (e.g., Bakos 2013, Rodgers 2018).

Figure 7. Composite Map of All Indications of Negative Attitude

Number of those who
described an area with
a negative attitude label

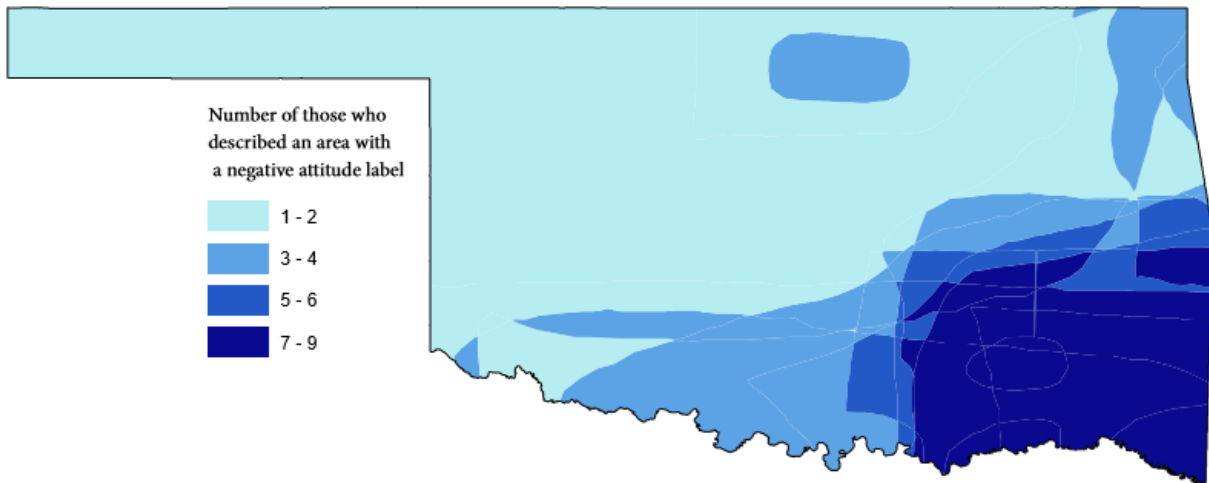- 1 - 2
- 3 - 4
- 5 - 6
- 7 - 9

Figure 7 is a composite map of each time a participant indicated "Negative Attitude." There were

16 responses (4.11% of all labels) which indicate terms with negative connotations, such as

"redneck," "hillbilly," and "hick." As with the overall map (Figure 4), the rural map (Figure 5),

and the southern map (Figure 6), the southeast corner is especially distinct in this map and seems

to continue to point to the considerable salience of southern and southern-influenced speech in

the state.

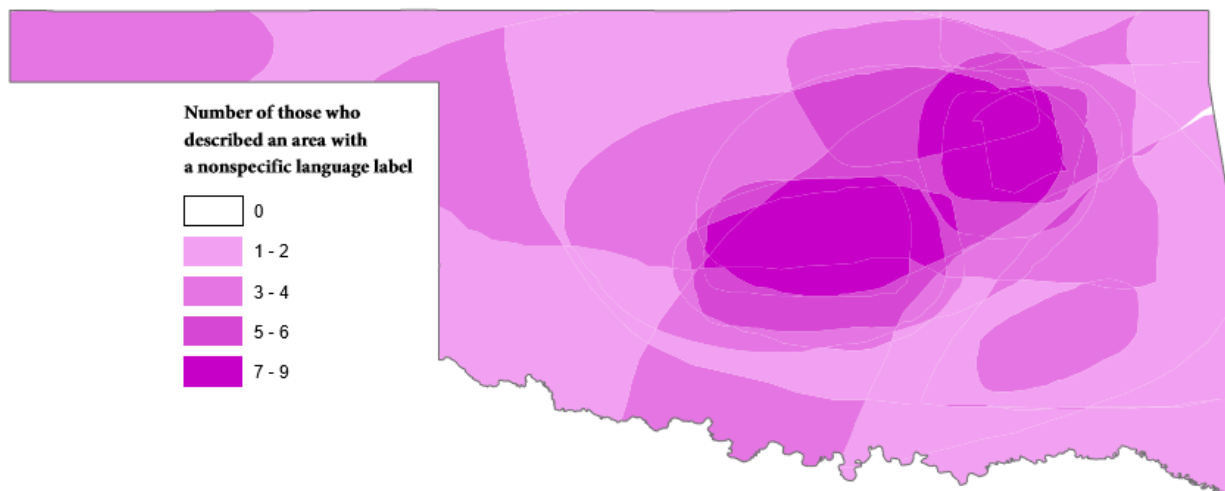**Figure 8. Composite Map of All Indications of Nonspecific Language**

Figure 8 is a composite map of each time a participant indicated "Nonspecific Language." There were 19 responses (4.88% of all labels) which indicate areas that are described with nonspecific language, or language which does not describe a specific speech pattern or demographic trait. This includes terms such as "no accent," "no dialect," "same," and "similar." The particularly salient areas here are Oklahoma City and Tulsa.

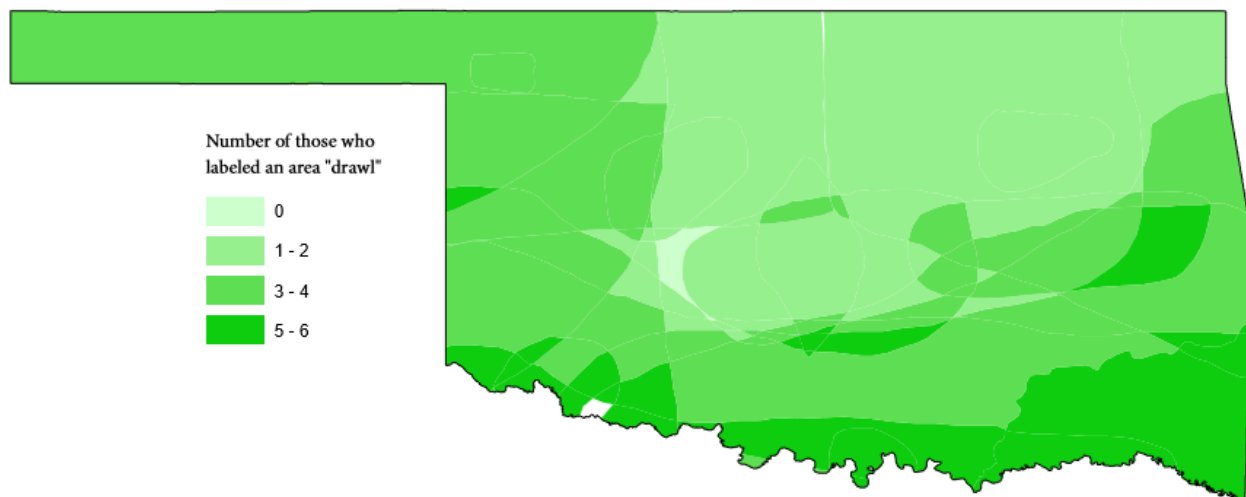**Figure 9. Composite Map of All Indications of Drawl**

Figure 9 is a composite map of each time a participant indicated Drawl. There were 20 responses (5.14% of all labels) with references to drawl, including "drawl," "drawling," and "draw" (sic, a common misspelling almost certainly based on l-vocalization in local pronunciation). The distinct areas here are the panhandle and the Southern border.

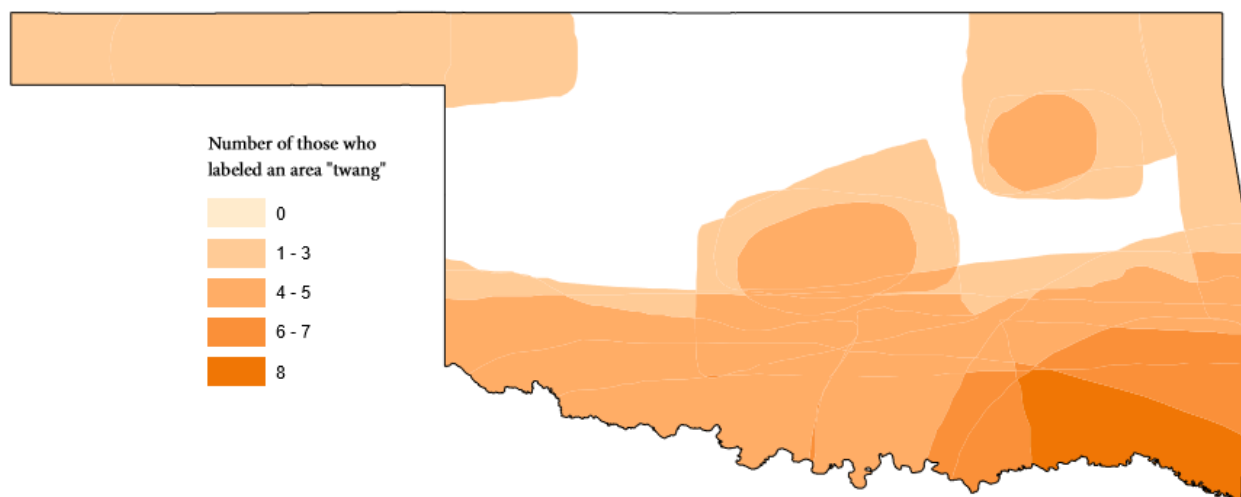**Figure 10. Composite Map of All Indications of Twang**

Figure 10 is a composite map of each time a participant indicated Twang. There were 18 responses (4.63%) with references to twang, including "twang," "twangy," and "more twang." The distinct areas here are the Southeast corner and, surprisingly, Oklahoma City and Tulsa.

Analysis.

All Indicated Regions.

Figure 4 shows the composite map of all responses. Tt is clear that participants feel most strongly about the Panhandle, the areas surrounding Oklahoma City and Tulsa, the southern border, and especially the southeast corner.

The Panhandle is visually and geographically salient because it extends away from body of the state, and it is sparsely populated (Figure 1). Because participants likely do not know many people from this sparsely populated region and because it is isolated, participants may be basing their belief simply on unfamiliarity.

While it is possible that instrumental bias may have influenced participants responses to Oklahoma City and Tulsa, it is also likely that participants have a stronger opinion about these urban centers because of their contrast with perceptions of the rural areas of the state. This is evident by comparing to the Rural map (Figure 5) in which these urban centers are not indicated.

Because the Southeast corner is by far the most salient, we can assume that people feel more strongly about the supposed negative connotations related to this stigmatized "Little Dixie" area (Bakos 2013, Rodgers 2018).

Rural and Southern v. Negative Attitude.

The Rural map (Figure 5) and the Southern map (Figure 6) show similar geographical patterns with more salience along the Southern border and especially in the Southeast corner. The Negative Attitude map (Figure 7) shows the same patterns, which implies that participants may perceive both Rurality and Southernness with negative connotations. However, while much more of the state is considered rural, it is mainly the areas also considered southern that have the most negative association. This is likely due to a popular notion that Southerners are uneducated and incorrect in their language choices (Preston 1996).

Figure 5 (Rurality) shows a lack of overlap for Oklahoma City and Tulsa and indicates the distinctiveness of these urban centers. The most overlap occurs in the Southeast Corner and along the Southern border, but there is also a significant overlap in the panhandle. This is significant because population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau from 2017 (Figure 1) show that the Southeast corner is more densely populated than either the opposite half of the southern border or the panhandle. This implies that respondents may relate rurality to criteria other than a lack of population density. This could be a cultural phenomenon in which participants recognize a cluster of a certain type of person as a "rural" area, despite the increase in population. This interpretation is substantiated by the report of the use of the term "country" for features of cultural behavior in populated areas (Hall-Lew and rogers 2012). That being said, the distinction of rurality outside the urban centers of Oklahoma City and Tulsa seems to indicate that participants do recognize population density to some extent.

Figure 6 is a composite map of each time a participant indicated Southern. Unsurprisingly, the lower half of the state shows more overlap. However, there is much more southern distinctiveness in the Southeast corner. This demonstrates that indications of the south may not

only be related to geography, but also to more subjective criteria. Here too, this may be a cultural phenomenon in which participants may recognize a certain type of person as being more "southern" despite the lack of geographic distinctiveness.

Figure 7 (Negative Attitude) is a composite map of each time a participant indicated terms with a negative connotation. In this map, there is an overwhelming indication of the Southeast corner and a moderate one of the Southern border. This reveals the stigmatization of the Southeast corner, often called "Little Dixie," which also bleeds into the rest of the Southern border (Bakos 2013)

Collectively, these maps reveal an overlap between rurality, southernness, and negative attitudes. This demonstrates the stigmatization of these qualities because the same regions associated with rurality and southernness are perceived with negative connotations.

However, while the indication for rural is more salient along the Southern border, it is also present throughout the state, whereas the indication for Southern is mainly present in the lower half of the state, and especially in the Southeast corner. Considering this, the Negative Attitude map seems to be more related to the Southern qualities than the rural qualities, because the Negative Attitude map also lacks prominence throughout the state. This implies a stronger stigmatization of Southern qualities than rural qualities. The areas with rural and southern are marked with negative attitudes, whereas the areas that are marked only rural do not draw the same negative connotations. This is likely due to a popular notion among nonlinguists that Southerners are uneducated and incorrect in their language choices (Preston 1996) but that "country" labels encompass positive stereotypes as well (Bakos 2013).

Nonspecific and Rural negative space.

The Nonspecific Language map (Figure 8) includes labels such as "no accent," "no dialect," "same," and "similar." This map indicates a distinct overlap centered in the areas of Oklahoma City and Tulsa. This could be because these urban centers have a stronger influx of a variety of people, making it more difficult to define a specific characteristic. However, it is more likely to be a contrast with the rurality outside of these cities. The Nonspecific Language map shows more concentration in Oklahoma City and Tulsa almost certainly because these urban areas do not share the predominating "hick" stigmatization of the state, as illustrated in Figure 7.

Drawl and Twang

The maps for Drawl (Figure 9) and Twang (Figure 10) are both associated with the south and southeast parts of the state, but the interesting problem of twang being also present in the cities requires further investigation. Treating Drawl and Twang separately allows us to see this distinction.

Figure 9 is a composite map of each time a participant indicated Drawl. This map shows increased salience in the panhandle and the southern border. This appears to be the opposite of the Nonspecific Language map (Figure 8) and very similar to the rural map (Figure 5).

Figure 10 is a composite map of each time a participant indicated Twang. While this map is clearly focused on the south, it is surprisingly also there in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. Therefore, twang may be a language feature which is perceived less negatively as a part of general Oklahoma speech (Rodgers 2018).

Conclusion.

Through this study, I found that respondents altered their perceptions of a variety of English based on their perceptions of the people who spoke that variety of English.

Considering Figure 4, a composite map of all responses, allows us to determine for which locations participants held the strongest opinions. The Panhandle is an ideal target for speaking differently because of its sparse population and isolation from the rest of the state. The Southeast corner is the most salient because of negative connotations related to this stigmatized "Little Dixie" area. The urban centers of Oklahoma City and Tulsa show more overlap because of their contrast with the rural areas of the state and their status as a "default" standard.

Collectively, Figures 5-7 (Rural, Southern, and Negative Attitude respectively) reveal the stigmatization of rurality and the South. However, there appears to be more stigmatization of Southern qualities than rural qualities, likely due to a popular notion among nonlinguists that Southerners are uneducated and incorrect in their language choices (Preston 1996).

The urban centers of Oklahoma are distinct by their lack of stigmatization when compared to the Southern rural areas. The Nonspecific Language map (Figure 8) shows more concentration in Oklahoma City and Tulsa because these urban areas do not share in the predominating stigmatization of the state.

Figures 9 and 10, the Drawl and Twang maps respectively, are both associated with the stigmatized South. However, twang appears less stigmatized because of its presence in the urban centers of Oklahoma, which implies that it is perceived as an Oklahoman trait throughout the state.

These results reveal a range of Oklahomans' perceptions about language within their state and suggest important ways they divide the linguistic landscape. These beliefs and perceptions

are important components of the linguistic identity of people in Oklahoma and, as such, are likely to contribute to the linguistic decisions people continually make. This project makes a valuable contribution to ongoing research on language in Oklahoma by surveying nonlinguists' beliefs about language in the state and demonstrating how Oklahomans conceive of linguistic and attitudinal variation.

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Acknowledgements.

Appendix.

Table 2. All Categories of Qualitative Labels.

Code	Label	Frequency	Percentage	Example
0	No label	66	5.56%	-
1	Accent	86	7.25%	Includes all Speech Pattern and Marked/Standard
2	Speech Pattern	52	4.38%	Includes all Twang, Drawl, and Rate
3	Twang	18	1.52%	"twang", "twangy", "more twang"
4	Drawl	20	1.69%	"drawl", "drawling", "draw" (sic)
5	Rate	16	1.35%	"faster", "slower", "more drawn out"
6	Marked/Standard	29	2.45%	Includes all Marked and Standard
7	Marked	12	1.01%	"variety"
8	Standard	21	1.77%	"formal", "uniform", "professional"
9	Nonspecific	19	1.60%	"accent", "no dialect", "same", "talk different", "similar"
10	Places	136	11.47%	Includes all Marker and Population Density*
11	Marker	136	11.47%	Includes all Town, State, and Region
12	Town	36	3.04%	"Ardmore", "OKC", "pc"
13	State	47	3.96%	Includes all Oklahoma, Texas, and Other State
14	Oklahoma	21	1.77%	"Oklahoma", "Oklahoman", and "okie"
15	Texas	18	1.52%	"Texas", "Texan", "Texan accent"
16	Other State	11	0.93%	"Kansas", "Ark", "Missouri"
17	Regions	65	5.48%	"West", "SE", "Central"
18	Southern	43	3.63%	"southern", "southern sounding", southern accent"
19	Other Region	22	1.85%	"West", "SE", "Central"
20	Survey	8	0.67%	"I-35", "Ozark Mtns", "No man's land"
21	Population Density	57	4.81%	Includes all Urban and Rural
22	Urban	12	1.01%	"metro", "city", "urban"
23	Rural	48	4.05%	"farms", "small towns", and includes all Country
24	Country	36	3.04%	"country", "cowboy", "red dirt"
25	Race/Ethnicity	11	0.93%	"Mexican", "Native American", "White", "Redneck"
26	Vector	94	7.93%	"more", "less", or comparative "-er"
27	Negative Attitude	16	1.35%	"redneck", "hillbilly", "hick"
28	Misc	30	2.53%	"Bol Weevil"
-	Total	1186	100.00%	-

Figure 11. Hierarchy of Categories