

# “Our Southern is Different than Southern Southern”: Geographic Perceptions of Southern and Northern US English Dialect features in New Orleans English

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## 1 Introduction

Some regional U.S. dialects are more broadly enregistered than others; for example, listeners from outside of New York City and the American South hold strong stereotypes about the accents associated with these locales (e.g. Hartley and Preston 1999). In contrast, some locally enregistered dialects with strong regional associations stay below the level of pan-US awareness—e.g. Pittsburghese (cf. Johnstone 2009) and New Orleans English (NOE). Indeed, NOE speakers report being mistaken for New Yorkers, due to shared features with New York City English (NYCE) such as variable non-rhoticity and raised THOUGHT (Carmichael and Becker 2018). Further muddying the waters, many New Orleanians also exhibit some Southern linguistic features, such as /ai/-monophthongization (Carmichael 2014). This Northern-Southern combination of features can present an indexical quandary for non-local listeners. We conducted two geographic perception experiments to examine dialect classification of NOE speakers producing specific Northern and Southern dialect features, both in isolation and co-occurring as they do naturally in NOE.

In both experiments, we asked participants from either the NYC area or the South to evaluate sentence-long, unmanipulated recordings of four New Orleanian speakers. We examined how naturally produced sentences featuring NYC-linked features, Southern features, or a combination of the two were placed geographically in evaluations. Results suggest that the same NOE speakers can be linked with geographically disparate locations depending on which features of their overall style are encountered. Further, it appears that certain place-linked features—particularly NYC-linked non-rhotic coda /r/—seem to carry greater indexical weight than others in participants' geographical classification of speakers. While NOE constitutes a combination of features formed through bricolage (Eckert 2008), listeners unfamiliar with the dialect appear to make speaker location judgments based on single salient features—in this case, those linked with NYCE. This suggests that dialect identification is affected by both listener experience and the indexical weight of particular place-linked features. We thus build on prior dialect identification research (e.g. Clopper and Pisoni 2006) by considering the indexical weight of certain regional U.S. dialect features, via a naturally-occurring example of dialectal ambiguity.

## 2 Regional Dialect Identification and Enregisterment

### 2.1 Dialect Identification

Research on regional dialects of English suggest that listeners can identify a speaker's region of origin at higher than chance probability. In a series of listening tasks, Clopper and Pisoni (2004, 2006, 2007) presented participants with audio clips of speakers from different parts of the U.S. and asked them to complete a forced-choice categorization task. While certain regions were frequently confused with each other—in particular, the West and Midwest, and New England and the Mid-Atlantic region—three consistent distinctions across listeners arose: the Northeast, the South, and the West/Midwest. Notably, accuracy in dialect classification was higher for mobile listeners who had firsthand experience in the dialect areas in question.

Work in language attitudes and perceptual dialectology have demonstrated that certain social stereotypes are often linked to regional dialects. Intriguingly, some of these judgments are available even when listeners are presented with unfamiliar dialects (Ladegaard 1998) or if they are unable to identify the regional origin of the speaker (Milroy & McClenaghan 1977). Listeners also make

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place-specific sociolinguistic judgments. In a series of matched guise tests examining ING, Campbell-Kibler (2007, 2009) demonstrated that participants evaluated speakers using the velar variant differently depending on whether they perceived them as Southern or not. Similarly, Carmichael (2016, 2018) demonstrated that speakers perceived as ‘accented’ from ideologically marked dialect areas—such as NYC and the South—were less downrated on social factors related to status and solidarity than those perceived as accented from ideologically unmarked areas, such as the Midwest.

It is thus clear that listeners often categorize speakers according to their perceived origin, and attach place-specific sociolinguistic judgments to their speech.

## 2.2 Place-linked Dialects and Enregisterment

While listeners can derive links between locales and place-linked linguistic features through experience with speakers from those locations, these indexical links can also arise and be reinforced through processes of enregisterment. Enregisterment represents “processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms” (Agha 2003:231). In some cases, dialects become enregistered as place-linked ways of speaking via meta-discursive processes, including media depictions of place-linked personae, the use of linguistic styles in place-linked commodities, and metalinguistic naming and discourse of geographically defined linguistic styles (e.g. Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson 2006). In terms of regional U.S. dialect distinctions, Southern accents and NYC accents have shown to be highly enregistered for individuals throughout the country (Preston 1996, 1999; Hartley and Preston 1999). These enregistered regional dialects can, over time, be tied to certain personae—for example, the Pittsburgh Yinzer (Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson 2006; Johnstone 2009), the aloof New Yorker (Becker 2014), the California Valley Girl (D’Onofrio 2015), or the New Orleans Yat (Carmichael and Dajko 2016).

Linguistic features take on social meanings in combination with other features via processes of stylistic bricolage. For example, as mentioned above, Campbell Kibler (2007, 2009) showed that the way in which variants of ING are evaluated differed significantly depending on other place-linked linguistic features present in a given voice, indicating that ING’s social meanings are multifaceted and context-dependent. However, in the process of enregisterment, not all regional linguistic features are equally salient. For example, Carmichael (2014, 2017, 2020) notes that while variable non-rhoticity is highly enregistered in New Orleans English, other notable features such as the split short-a system go largely unnoticed. Similarly, in Pittsburgh /aw/-monophthongization is highly enregistered and linked to the Yinzer persona (Johnstone and Kiesling 2008), while other features in this region do not carry this same place-linked social value. Questions therefore emerge as to how certain features become particularly emblematic of place-linked social meanings and personae, as well as how this might lead such features to carry more indexical weight in processes of sociolinguistic evaluation and perception than others. Taken to the extreme, such weighting makes it plausible that a single variant could pack enough indexical punch to cue place-linked social meanings even when heard in isolation (e.g. California-linked *dude*, Kiesling 2004), or in combination with geographically incongruent features. This study probes the way in which various place-linked linguistic features—all of which could be argued broadly to have some place-linked social meanings in the U.S.—are used by listeners making geographical judgments about speakers, particularly in contexts where these features may conflict indexically in cuing place.

## 2.3 New Orleans English

New Orleans represents a particularly useful locale to examine indexical weighting of socially meaningful features, as its local dialect demonstrates a distinctive mixture of Northern and Southern dialect features, setting it apart as ‘marginal to the South’ (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006). A number of NYCE-sounding features are present in New Orleans, such as variable non-rhoticity, raised THOUGHT, and a split short-a system (Labov 2007; Carmichael 2014, 2017, 2020; Carmichael & Becker 2018) and locals report being regularly mistaken for New Yorkers. Many of the traditional NYC-sounding features are on the retreat in New Orleans; however, there is an enclave of linguistically conservative speakers located in Chalmette, Louisiana—a working class suburb

located just downriver of the city (Carmichael 2014). There, these features are locally enregistered and often performed by locals and non-locals alike with knowledge of the city (Coles 2001; Carmichael and Dajko 2016), but outside of New Orleans are not well known.

New Orleans English also features key Southern features such as /ai/-monophthongization. This unique North-South combination of features makes New Orleans English an ideal site for further examination into how listeners identify and perceive speaker origin in the face of conflicting linguistic evidence. Further, although NOE as a dialect is not highly recognizable to Americans outside of the New Orleans area, its composite features are associable with place-linked dialects that are highly enregistered—NYCE and Southern English. We therefore examine how listeners from the New York City area and the South make geographical sense of NOE speakers, and how this varies depending on the features of the dialect to which they are exposed.

## 2.4 Research Questions

Via two matched guise test experiments, we posed the following questions:

1. Which linguistic features used naturalistically by New Orleanian speakers influence their perceived geographic background?
2. How does listener region of origin interact with the perceived geographic background of these speakers?
3. How do listeners reconcile the combination of stereotypically Southern and stereotypically NYC linguistic features in the same New Orleanian speech stream when determining the geographic background of a speaker?

To answer these questions, we presented participants with a series of audio recordings from New Orleans English speakers. Some of the sentences listeners heard contained linguistic features tied to a Northern dialect area (NYC), some contained linguistic features tied to the Southern U.S. dialect area, and some contained a combination of features from both areas. We presented the same samples to listeners from NYC-adjacent areas and those from the U.S. South. We then examined the correspondence from listeners' judgments of speaker geographical background to the features (Northern/NYC vs. Southern vs. a combination) they heard in the speech samples, the listener's own geographical background, and the interaction between the two.

## 3 Experiment 1

Both experiments in this study were matched-guise style dialect classification tasks, focusing on a speaker's perceived geographic origin. In Experiment 1, we asked two groups of listeners to geographically categorize the same New Orleans English speakers who were using *either* only features associated with the Northern/NYC dialect areas, *or* only features associated with the U.S. South dialect area. The goal of this study was to examine whether the same New Orleans English speakers could be perceived as being from NYC or from the South based on the features being presented. We thereby removed the natural ambiguity present in NOE accents in which linguistic features indexically linked to both NYC and the South are present. We also examined the way that listener geographic background interacted with these judgments.

### 3.1 Stimuli

All sentences were naturally produced in interview speech by four female New Orleans English speakers from Chalmette, Louisiana with similar demographic backgrounds. For Experiment 1, one sentence per speaker was selected to contain stereotypically Southern features (alveolar -in in two clips, /ai/ monophthongization in two clips, dh-stopping in two clips and l-vocalization in one clip) but no NYC-linked features, and one sentence per speaker contained stereotypically "NYC" features (all contained post-vocalic non-rhoticity, two also contained the MARRY vowel produced with lax short-a) but no Southern features (see Appendix for full stimulus set). We aimed for semantic

content that did not clearly cue place and we prioritized naturally produced sentences, rather than control overt content and exact feature productions. Sentences were 2-7 seconds long.

### 3.2 Design and Procedure

Experiment 1 was completed online via Prolific by 160 participants. Half of these participants were from the NYC tri-state area (defined as the states of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut), while the other half was from the Southern U.S. (defined as the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana), all as identified through their Prolific user information questionnaires. Each participant heard each of the four speakers only once, with either a Southern or NYC guise sentence from each (four trials per participant, two Southern and two NYC), with guise and speaker counter-balanced across participants.

From Prolific, participants were directed to a Qualtrics survey to complete the task. They first completed a sound check prior to the main task to ensure they were able to hear the audio clips. They were then provided with the instructions, “*We are interested in what impressions you can get about a speaker just based on their voice. You will hear a person speaking. Press the play button to hear the sentence. You may play the clip as many times as you like. Based on what you hear, please answer the following questions.*” After listening to the clip, participants were first asked to type the sentence they heard, as a check that they listened to and understood the sentence. They were then asked to respond in an open-response text box to the question, “*Where do you think the speaker is from?*” They were also asked a series of other demographic and social attribute questions about the speaker, however, we do not focus on these questions or their results for the present study. At the end of the listening task, participants were asked to report the places they had lived and at what ages they resided in those places.

### 3.3 Analysis and Results

In order to see clearly how results patterned, participants’ open-answer geographic responses were collapsed into regions identified by the authors as ‘Northern U.S.’, ‘Southern U.S.’, and ‘Other,’ using the Atlas of North American English (Labov et al. 2006) as a guide to classify the Southern region and collapsing the North (including North Central and Inland North) and Northeastern regions into the Northern category. Trials where the participant did not accurately transcribe the target sentence were not included in analysis. Results indicated that, on the whole, all listeners identified the “Northern” clips (those with only Northern features) as Northern speakers and those with only Southern features as Southern speakers. This pattern can be seen in Figure 1, in which responses from participants coming from NY and the South are in two side-by-side panes, the features presented in the sound clip are along the x-axis, and the proportion categorization into each collapsed/simplified dialect area—North, South, or ‘other’—are color-coded by regional response along the y-axis. Notably, listeners from the Southern recruitment group (participants who listed their location as from the U.S. South) were slightly more consistent in classifying both Northern and Southern guises compared to listeners from the NYC-area recruitment group (participants who listed their location as from New York, New Jersey, or Connecticut).

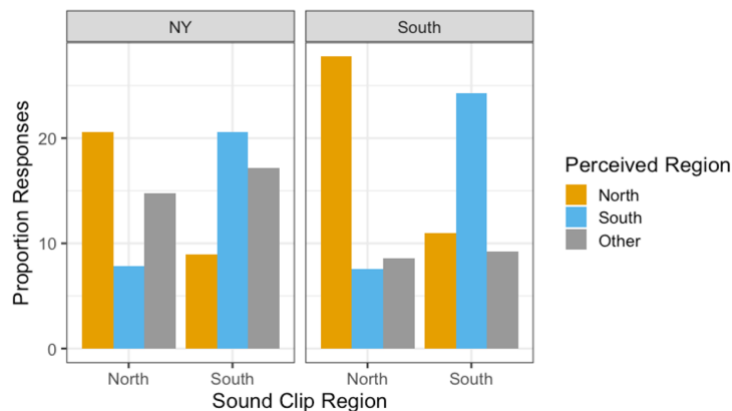


Figure 1: Experiment 1 perceived region (collapsed) by sound clip guise and Participant region  
 A mixed effects logistic regression model was fitted on a subset of the overall classification data (N = 375), using binary classification as Southern versus Northern as the dependent variable. Responses that were classified as “other” (whether a different dialect region within the U.S., a general response of “U.S.,” or a response outside the U.S.) were not included in the statistical analysis. Guise (sound clip region, default = North, vs. South) and participants’ recruitment geographic origin group (default = NYC tri-state area, vs. South) were both included as binary predictors. Random effects of participant and speaker were included in the model. As illustrated in Table 1, identification of a speaker as “Southern” was significantly predicted by sound clip guise (guises with Southern features were significantly more likely to be classified as “Southern”), but not by participant location group. The interaction between clip guise and participation location was not significant and did not improve model fit.

	Estimate	Std. Error	Z-value	P-value
Intercept	-1.09	0.30	-3.65	0.0003***
Sound clip region = <i>South</i>	1.97	0.24	8.29	<0.0001***
Participant region of origin = <i>South</i>	-0.16	0.24	-0.69	0.49

Table 1: Mixed effects logistic regression main effects summary for Southern (versus Northern) classification (Experiment 1).

These results thus confirm that the clips and features chosen were indeed perceived as Southern or Northern, respectively, regardless of the listener’s region of origin. Figure 2 further breaks down these classification results by more specific responses, demonstrating that for the Northern guises, both NY and Southern listeners were most likely to identify speakers as being from NYC specifically (green bars in Figure 2), and for the Southern guise, both NY and Southern listeners perceived these speakers to be from the South (red bars in Figure 2)—though very few identified Louisiana (orange bars) specifically. Identification as being from Louisiana was even lower for the Northern guise. This demonstrates that listeners did not interpret the speakers to be from Louisiana regardless of the features presented, and that certain features were identifiably NYC-sounding to them, while others were identifiably Southern to them.

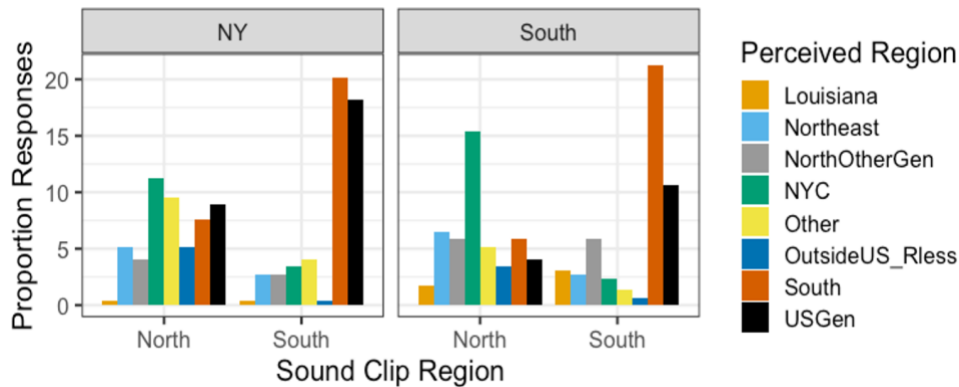


Figure 2: Perceived region (uncollapsed) by sound clip guise and Participant region (Experiment 1)

Thus, Experiment 1 establishes that these recordings in isolation—with only Northern and Southern features—do indeed trigger listeners to believe the speakers are from the North or the South specifically, regardless of the participants’ own geographic background. It further seems to indicate that at least for these listeners, the speakers are not heard as particularly New Orleanian.

### 4 Experiment 2

Experiment 1 established that the perceived geographic origin of New Orleans English speakers was malleable in the predicted directions according to enregistered NYC- or Southern-linked features present in the speech stream. Experiment 2 builds on this finding to test how listeners reconcile *combinations* of place-linked features in New Orleans English when they are encountered in the same recording. In Experiment 2, we use the same matched guise task design with new stimuli from a subset of the Experiment 1 speakers. We examine how the addition of a geographically “incongruent” feature influenced perceptions of the speaker’s location of origin.

#### 4.1 Stimuli

All sentences were naturally produced in interview speech by three of the female New Orleans English speakers tested in Experiment 1. For Experiment 2, we hand-selected full sentences or combinations of sentences for which part of the recording contained only stereotypically Southern features, and part of the recording contained only NYC-linked features. The clips could therefore be subdivided to contain *only* one or the other set of place-linked features, while the full clip would contain both sets of features. For example, Speaker D’s full clip was, “Tommy must’ve come **over**, and he’s **sayin’**, ‘I’m not **leavin’**, I’m **stayin’**.” The first part of the clip, “Tommy must’ve come over” contained a non-rhotic coda in “over,” a NYC-linked feature. The second part of the clip, “He’s sayin’, I’m not leavin’, I’m stayin’” contained three instances of alveolar -in (in “sayin’,” “leavin’,” and “stayin’”). We were thus able to present *either* a) the first part of the clip only, b) the second part of the clip only, or c) the entire clip to listeners to examine how listeners evaluated a) NYC-only features, b) Southern-only features, or c) all of the features together from this same voice and sentence (see Appendix for full stimulus set). Once again, we aimed for content not clearly linked to place. Two of the three full clips contained Southern features in the first part and Northern features in the second part, while one of the clips contained Northern features in the first part and Southern features in the second part.

#### 4.2 Design and Procedure

225 participants were recruited via Prolific for Experiment 2. They were geographically balanced in the same fashion as in Experiment 1: half from the NY tri-state area, half from the Southern US. Each participant heard each of three speakers in Experiment 2 only one time, balanced across three guises: Southern-only portion, NYC-only portion, or full combination recordings, with three trials per participant, order randomized. The instructions and response types were the same as in Experiment 1, with the response of interest being the perceived geographic origin of the speaker in each trial.

#### 4.3 Analysis and Results

As in Experiment 1, open geographic responses to each trial for Experiment 2 were collapsed into regions identified by the authors as ‘Northern U.S.’, ‘Southern U.S.’, and ‘Other,’ in the manner described above, using the Atlas of North American English (Labov et al. 2006). Again, the ‘Other’ category constituted responses that were outside of Northern or Southern U.S. regions, responses that reflected the U.S. broadly, or responses of areas outside of the U.S. Trials where the participant did not accurately transcribe the target sentence were not included in analysis. Furthermore, during the analysis process, we discovered that one of the Southern stimulus portions did not, in fact, contain South-linked features (instead it contained only a raised /au/ vowel, typically associated with Canada and parts of the Northern U.S.). We decided to remove this stimulus from analysis in the interest of consistency across speakers and trials.

Results indicated that, on the whole, listeners were once again most likely to identify the “Northern” clips (those clips with only Northern features) as speakers from the North, and those with only Southern features as Southern speakers (Figure 3). Notably, however, while this pattern held prominently for listeners from the Southern recruitment group (participants who listed their location as from the U.S. South), listeners from the NYC tri-state area still rated the Southern-only clips as most likely to be from the North (though a greater proportion of NYC-area listeners responded with a Southern locale to these clips than to the clips with NYC-only features).

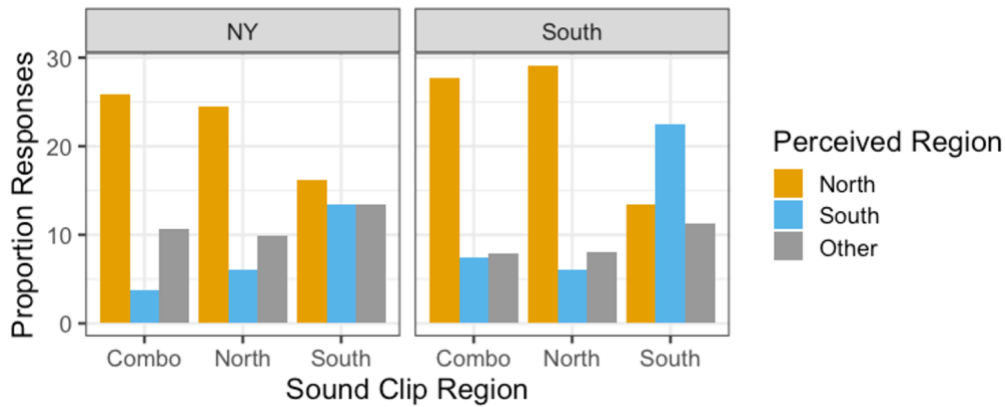


Figure 3: Perceived region (collapsed) by Clip and Participant region (Experiment 2)

As in Experiment 1, a mixed effects logistic regression model was fitted on a subset of the overall classification data ( $N = 373$ ), using binary classification of Southern (vs. Northern) as the dependent variable (“Other” responses were not included in the statistical analysis). Guise (sound clip region, default = Combination, vs. South vs. North) and participants’ recruitment geographic origin group (default = NYC tri-state area, vs. South) were both included as categorical predictors. The goal was to examine whether and how geographical classification for each *portion* of the full clip significantly differed from classification of the clip in its entirety. Random intercepts of participant and speaker were included in the model. A model summary is shown in Table 2.

	Estimate	Std. Error	Z-value	P-value
Intercept	-1.96	0.34	-5.77	<0.0001***
Sound clip guise = <i>Northern only</i>	0.09	0.33	0.26	0.79
Sound clip guise = <i>Southern only</i>	1.86	0.37	5.02	<0.0001***
Participant region of origin = <i>South</i>	0.43	0.29	1.49	0.14

Table 2: Mixed effects logistic regression main effects summary for Southern (versus Northern) classification (Experiment 2).

The model illustrated that Southern-feature-only clip portions were classified significantly differently from their full combination clip counterparts. Specifically, they were more likely to be classified as from the South, as expected. However, Northern-feature-only clip portions were not classified significantly differently from the full Combination clips (Table 2). Participant regional background was not a significant predictor of response and did not significantly interact with clip region.

Figure 4 demonstrates an uncollapsed view of participant responses according to perceived region, demonstrating that very few participants—from NY or Southern—identified any of the speakers in the clips as being from Louisiana, regardless of the features they were presented with. Furthermore, a large majority of the responses to the Northern-feature-only and combination clips placed the speaker specifically in NYC in the greatest proportions, with the second greatest proportion (aside from responses that indicated the U.S. generally) being from the Northeast. This suggests that listeners identified the relevant features as geographically linked to NYC specifically, and that this held even in the full combination clips where these features were combined with Southern-linked features.

We argue that this pattern is the result of the indexical power of NYC-linked features, particularly variable non-rhoticity (present in two of the three clips) in ‘swamping’ the Southern-sounding features. While listeners do indeed hear these speakers as from the South in the absence

of these NYC-linked features, as shown in responses to the Southern-only guises in both experiments, the presence of even one NYC-linked feature like non-rhoticity overrides this classification. Listeners unfamiliar with the dialect thus appear to judge speaker location based on salient single features (here, NYCE) despite exposure to combinations of place-linked features. These findings may help explain why New Orleanians are frequently misidentified as New Yorkers.

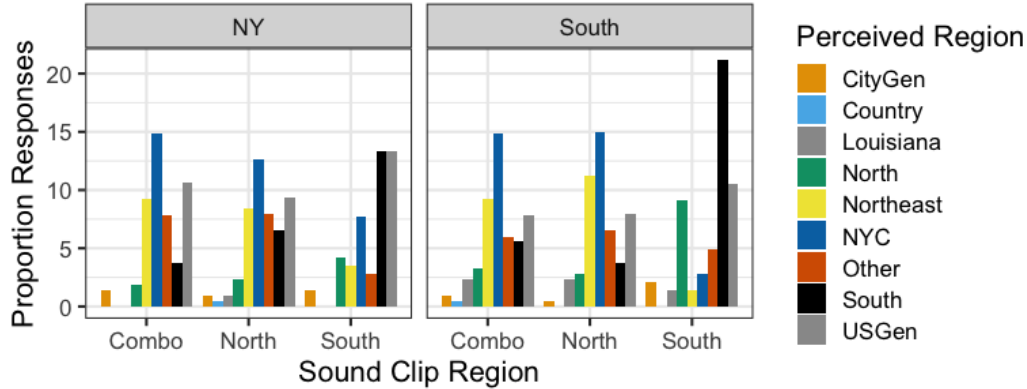


Figure 4: Perceived region (uncollapsed) by Clip and Participant region (Experiment 2)

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

With this study we have demonstrated that listeners who are unfamiliar with New Orleans English judge speaker location based on salient features within the speech stream, and that features of this dialect can be variably linked with the U.S. South or the U.S. North (particularly the New York City area or Northeast generally), depending on which features are encountered. Furthermore, dialect identification of these stimuli appears to be affected by the presence of particularly salient place-linked features. Specifically, the presence of NYC-linked features like non-rhoticity in audio stimuli ‘swamped’ linguistic features that were, on their own, perceived to be Southern. This led participants to hear speakers as being from NYC even in the presence of features like alveolar -in and /ai/ monophthongization. While the consistency and degree to which these classification patterns held appeared to differ between listeners from different regions, the overall patterns were similar for listeners from the NYC area and from the U.S. South. This supports previous findings regarding nation-wide consistency in the geographic indexicality of certain regional dialect features (Preston 1996, 1999, Hartley and Preston 1999). It may also help explain the repeated reports from New Orleans English speakers of being confused for New York City speakers (e.g. Carmichael and Becker 2018). Overall, this study illustrates that the social associations listeners make with speech they encounter can be affected not only by listener experience, but also by the indexical weighting of certain linguistic features over others.

While this study serves as an initial step toward understanding how particular features contribute to geographic perceptions of New Orleans English speakers, our prioritization of naturally-produced stimuli led to a lack of control over the specific features, the number of features, and the content of the recordings used, all of which could have influenced results. As a follow-up, we plan to conduct matched-guise experiments on a similar participant pool with stimuli that explicitly manipulates the presence of more indexically salient features (non-rhoticity) and less indexically salient features (raised THOUGHT) in a more controlled fashion. This will allow us to tease apart the linguistic and social factors at play in the processes of dialect identification we observe in the present study, and present the opportunity to test how they may affect further social evaluations of speakers.

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## Appendix

Speaker	Clip Region	Place-linked features	Phrase
A	Southern	/l/ vocalization, dh-stopping	I don't know if they <b>told</b> you <b>that</b> .
A	Northern	non-rhoticity, MARRY vowel	My <b>neighbor</b> , he was, he was getting <b>married</b>
B	Southern	/ai/ monophth, alveolar -in	When is the last <b>time</b> the phone never rang, no TV, no <b>worryin'</b>
B	Northern	non-rhoticity, MARRY vowel	She might not have <b>carried</b> me in <b>her</b> womb, but I live in <b>her heart</b>
C	Southern	/ai/ monophth	Now it's, ok let's <b>drive</b> over there in 30 minutes
C	Northern	non-rhoticity	I mean you just sat there in your <b>car</b>
D	Southern	alveolar -in	He's <b>sayin'</b> I'm not <b>leavin'</b> I'm <b>stayin'</b>
D	Northern	non-rhoticity	So then we wound up <b>there</b> and it was like a week we <b>were there</b>

Table A1. Stimuli for Experiment 1.

Speaker	Clip Region	Place-linked features	Phrase
A	Southern	/l/ vocalization, dh-stopping	I don't know if they <b>told</b> you <b>that</b> .
A	Northern	raised/tense /ae/	They used to <b>have</b> parades every night
A	Combination		I don't know if they told you that. They used to have parades every night
C	Northern	non-rhoticity	I mean you just sat there in your <b>car</b>
C	Southern	raised /au/ ( <i>eliminated</i> )	And you just hung out
C	Combination		I mean you just sat there in your <b>car</b> and you just hung <b>out</b>
D	Northern	non-rhoticity	Tommy must've come <b>over</b>
D	Southern	alveolar -in	He's <b>sayin'</b> I'm not <b>leavin'</b> I'm <b>stayin'</b>
D	Combination		Tommy must've come <b>over</b> , and he's <b>sayin'</b> I'm not <b>leavin'</b> , I'm <b>stayin'</b>

Table A2. Stimuli for Experiment 2.