

Appalachian English as a linguistic frame of reference, not a fact
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In his book, *The Invention of Appalachia*, Allen Batteau explores the construction of the Appalachian Mountains region in the minds of Americans, using literary, historical, and media portrayals as a basis for his claim that while one cannot deny the lived experiences of Appalachians themselves, much of what the broader American public knows – or thinks they know – of the region is a figment of the imagination. In delving into the stereotypes of the region, he says, “Why are these experiences Appalachian, rather than southern or rural or Kentuckian? [...] naming the experience ‘Appalachia’ willfully associates it with a broad array of other texts [...] The experience is undeniable; the significance one attaches to it depends on how we talk about it. ‘Appalachia’ is a frame of reference, not a fact.” (Batteau 1990: 200).”

And so it is with the language varieties associated with the region as well. In this presentation, I will explore perceptual dialectological (e.g., Preston 1989, Cramer and Montgomery 2016) data that shows that Americans lean heavily into (primarily negative) stereotypes about Appalachia that are entangled with stereotypes of the broader American South to locate the region and the language varieties associated with it in a mental mapping task. These data were collected in a linguistically focused replication of Ulack and Raitz (1982), a cultural geography project aimed at understanding where people perceived the location of Appalachia. Participants were asked to indicate whether they believe any Appalachian varieties of English exist, and, if so, participants were instructed to indicate their location in a map of the Eastern United States. Participants were also asked to describe which characteristics they associate with Appalachia, its people, and its languages. In general, the characteristics indicated generally negative sentiments, while the specific linguistic features associated with the region rarely uniquely set Appalachian Englishes apart from surrounding dialect areas. To prove this last point, I also provide linguistic production data from the Linguistic Atlas Project (2023) that showcases the full extent of where one finds the linguistic features respondents used in identifying Appalachian Englishes.

Ultimately, this presentation shows how Appalachia and its language seem to serve as a scapegoat for all the ills of American society. The ways in which Appalachian Englishes are defined lack connection to the realities of linguistic facts; respondents broadly conceive of Appalachia as a place one finds non-standard features. We see that people vary not only in where they believe Appalachian Englishes exist but also in the social meanings attributed to them, showing how identities are constructed in ways that are entangled with lived experience and stereotypes.

References

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