

# Surveying Oklahoma Perceptual Dialectology Map Labels

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## Abstract

This study investigates Oklahomans' attitudes towards English language varieties in their own state. It combines the methods of perceptual dialectology, by looking at the labels that respondents used in a typical map-drawing task, with those of a content-analysis on post-task interviews. Examination of the map-drawing data told us that there were three distinct areas in this group of respondents' mental maps, namely the "southeast" part, the "western" part, and the "southern" part of Oklahoma. By using content analysis on the immediate follow-up map drawing discussion, the three areas in respondents' mental maps and their dialectological profile were reconstructed. The current study also looked into how such common dialectological labels as "southern", "country", "drawl" and "twang", were used to describe the English variation in Oklahoma by the target group of respondents.

**Keywords:** labels, maps, Oklahoman English, perceptual dialectology

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Oklahoma English in the Linguistic Landscape of the United States

Modern day Oklahoma is the destination state of the Trail of Tears when a large settlement of Native Americans was forced out of their southeastern homes and into the new land. They brought with them their indigenous languages, and over fifty years later, Europeans occupied the region with their predominantly Southern speech backgrounds (Southard, 1993) following the famous late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Land Runs. The Dust Bowl disaster in the 1930s to some extent further changed the language landscape, forcing the migration of some Oklahomans, or "Okies" (Carver, 1987, p. 236; Niedzielski & Preston, 2003, p. 155), to other states, particularly California. More recently the oil boom brought a new wave of Europeans, many of whom were speakers of dialects not native to the earlier immigrants (e.g., Bailey, Wickle, & Tillery, 1997). Due to all these events, Southard (1993) suggested that Oklahoma is "a laboratory case" for linguistic studies (p. 234).

The dialects within the state are indeed considerably varied, as shown in numerous language production analyses (e.g., Bailey et al., 1997; Bakos, 2013; Carver, 1987; Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2005; 2006; Weirich, 2013). Labov et al.'s (2006) *Atlas of North American English* (ANAE) shows how the state of Oklahoma can be divided into dialect areas based on pronunciation alone. For example, Labov, Ash and Boberg (2005, cited from Tillery, 2015, p. 149) tested the monophthongization of /ai/ to find out the boundary of Southern American English, and included "the southeastern half of Oklahoma" as part of the South. Based on lexicon, the analyses of Atwood (1962) and Carver (1987) presented different dialect areas. Furthermore, Bailey et al. (1997 and elsewhere) as well as ongoing work in RODEO (Research on the Dialects of English in Oklahoma led by Dr. Dennis Preston) add to our knowledge of language distribution in Oklahoma. While these works are informative, they are for the most part based on Oklahomans' English production, and less is known about how Oklahomans themselves perceive local dialect regions, although Rodgers (2017) is a thorough investigation of discursal data focusing on Oklahomans' perceptions of their own speech varieties. There have been hints about Oklahoman English variation from non-residents' perspectives (e.g., Hartley & Preston, 1999; Niedzielski & Preston, 2003), but only Bakos (2013), a part of the RODEO project, devoted part of his study to a discussion of the regions and the labels that Oklahomans assigned to Oklahoman English. Bakos (2013) established twelve profiles for the focal respondents, in which he revealed many linguistic features that had been centered on in previous research by other scholars, and compared them against how each individual reported what their own speech was like in the surveys and interviews. He found that their areal perceptions could fairly accurately reflect the general features, e.g., level of southernness, of their own language production, but his exploration of the labels that respondents assigned to Oklahoma English and its

varieties was only a minor part of his work. Further studies of perception data could provide a more in-depth understanding of respondents' mental dialect boundaries and in the question to what extent the respondents agreed with each other.

The present study attempts to explore variation within the state from the perspective of perceptual dialectology, and in doing so, limits respondent demographics to Oklahomans, following previous state-level, rather than nation-level, surveys of the sort done in California (Bucholtz, Bermudez, Fung, Vargas, & Edwards, 2008; Fought, 2002), Nevada (Fridland & Bartlett, 2006), Ohio (Campbell-Kibler & Bauer, 2015), Oregon (Hartley, 1999), and Washington (Evans, 2013). These state-level research projects, using map-drawing tasks to look into local people's perceptions, have provided a detailed picture of each individual state. Furthermore, this study adds to the analysis of non-linguist residents' map drawing labels and the analysis of respondents' follow-up discussions of their hand-drawn maps and labels.

### *1.2 The Linguistic Landscape of Oklahoma*

Prior to 1999, Oklahoma was the only individual state on the Linguistic Atlas Projects (LAP) website to be examined; all other states were investigated in regional bundles (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006). The Linguistic Atlas of Oklahoma (LAO) project, for example, recruited 57 participants, but most of the results have not been published. According to Preston and Bakos (2009), the two high points of previous studies on Oklahoma English took place in the 1950s and 1990s. In the 1950s, William Van Riper was the pioneer in collecting linguistic data from Oklahomans, and his study became the first part of the LAO, but only side-by-side presentations along with Texas data in Atwood (1962) have appeared, despite the fact that there has been some further analysis of these data by Southard (1993). The second intensive research period took place largely in the 1990s through the use of the Survey of Oklahoma Dialects (SOD), which had two versions: phone and fieldwork interviews (e.g., Bailey, Wikle, & Tillery, 1997). Though various types of production data have been collected from respondents in the state of Oklahoma, it has been hard for linguists to identify linguistic variation patterns in Oklahoma (Carver, 1987). Yet, boundaries have been proposed based on lexicon (Atwood, 1962), phonology and grammar (Tillery, 1992), and phonology and lexicon (Bailey et al., 1997). The current study seeks to add to this body of literature by adding perception-based data from a group of non-linguists and local residents of Oklahoma.

### *1.3 Perceptual Mapping in Dialectology Studies*

Preston (1989) is one of the founders of the field of perceptual dialectology and was the first to use and advocate a map-drawing task to find out folk perceptions regarding regional linguistic variation in the U.S.. Since his first attempts, many other researchers have taken advantage of the explicitness and simplicity of map-drawing tasks in reconstructing perceptual boundaries, much of it summarized in Preston (1999) and Long and Preston (2002) although there are many more recent examples, much of them discussed in Cramer (2016).

Accompanying the hand-drawn maps, a discussion with respondents on how and why they drew the boundaries in a certain way is highly beneficial and clarifying. From the earliest map collections Preston used follow-up discussions and initiated the technique of identifying a variety of descriptors (Preston, 1982), including such items as "accent, English, drawl, speech, twang, jargon, style, Lingo, dialect, and slang". Long (1999) also used post-task discussions in his work in Japan and Korea. He identified the most widely agreed-on dialect regions and elicited some names that respondents gave them. This study also did these two key steps to answer the two research questions. Long (1999) further looked into what descriptors respondents used to show distinct features of the regions. Other studies used more explicit forms of content analysis to study the geosocial meaning and patterns of labels (Evans, 2012; Hartley & Preston, 1999; Williams, Garrett, & Coupland, 1996). Williams et al., for example, delved into the linguistic variation in Welsh by interviewing teachers. They carried out a map-drawing task and then analyzed their data in two steps. First, they established a labeling scheme, which included such groups of descriptors as "linguistic form, affective, status and social norms, geosocial belonging, and rural versus urban" (Williams et al., 1996, p. 186). As a second step, they grouped the labels again based on geolinguistic keywords such as "Valleys, Cardiff, North Wales, Mid Wales/Borders." In a reverse order compared with Williams et al. (1996), this study started from geographical categorization and then examined the occurrences of previously acknowledged labels. Hartley and Preston (1999) adopted a set of topical themes to classify labels of English varieties within U.S. This set included "area, sound, identity, ethnicity, media, attributes, standardness, and distribution."

After one decade, researchers turned to a data-driven method to investigate data from maps. The data-driven method adopts a more descriptive approach, compared to the more prescriptive approaches used before. Evans (2012) used content analysis to deal with the labels she obtained from the map-drawing task for the state of Washington. To further investigate the city/country dichotomy, Evans (2012) grouped the labels together if they

were related to the two target cities, Seattle and Wenatchee. Focusing on the dichotomy between rural and urban or country and city in Evans' (2012) inspired the category naming in the current study. In the current study, the label category of "level of urbanity" was set up. From all these studies, it is easy to find that some researchers adopted "grounded theory" and gained some meaningful themes for discussion from their dialectological data, whereas others have their pre-determined label scheme before delving into their data. Similar to the above-mentioned studies, the current study also investigates the relationship among Oklahoman non-linguists' perception of English variation in the state, perceived characteristics of the people who maintain the variation, and the perceived geosocial features of certain regions by examining the labels that respondents have given in the map-drawing task. To reconstruct the mental maps in this group of respondents regarding Oklahoman English variation, the current study followed the steps of "grounded theory" and let the data present salient regional division; then a series of keywords highly meaningful from the literature revealed local non-linguists' perceptions of regional dialectological difference, which would answer the second research question.

#### *1.4 Perception-based Research on Oklahoma English*

Since the beginning of this century, there has been a trend of looking into linguistic boundaries within a state using perceptual dialectology methods, e.g., California (Bucholtz, Bermudez, Fung, Edwards, & Vargas, 2007; Bucholtz et al., 2008), Ohio (Benson, 2003), and Washington (Evans, 2012, 2013). Their research has added to the picture of perceptual dialectology from the state level. They collected perceptual data from local non-linguists and categorized the labels that the respondents used during the map-drawing task. Little research from this perspective has been carried out for the state of Oklahoma, although some researchers have looked into Oklahoman English from the angle of perceptual dialectology by sampling respondents from a specific area of the state. One such study surveyed the perceptual linguistic differences by respondents from south-central Oklahoma (Preston & Bakos, 2009) and another important and more recent one has consulted respondents from the border area between Oklahoma and Texas (Hall-Lew & Stephens, 2012). They delved into respondents' language attitudes towards "country talk" by interviewing respondents residing in the area on the border between Oklahoma and Texas (Hall-Lew & Stephens, 2012). They recruited five Oklahomans and twelve Texans who are either residents in Oklahoma or Texas but live close to the border between the two states. The participants in their study revealed to us that there is conformity in culture for residents who live in the bordering area between Oklahoma and Texas. "Country Talk" has been identified as a label for this culturally cohesive community across the border (Hall-Lew & Stephens, 2012, p. 260). Furthermore and being theoretically contributive, Hall-Lew and Stephens (2012) argued that the relationship between description for speech and that for corresponding personae is within the scope of enregisterment (Agha, 2003, 2007). Bethard (2009) looked into the English language production by respondents from Northeast Oklahoma, including the city of Tulsa. Bethard (2009) examined the factor of age, "Net generation" and "Baby Boomers" to be specific, in influencing the production of certain vowels, which have different characteristics between speakers of American Southern English and those of non-southern varieties of English. All these studies invited respondents from different pockets of cities of various sizes from across the state of Oklahoma. A study has yet to be conducted that spans broader areas of the state.

Although examining labels in a state map has been highly informative (e.g., Evans, 2013), few published studies have dug into labels on a map of Oklahoma by a relatively large group of non-linguist residents. Relying on perceptual data, researchers usually connect linguistic variation with respondents' affective perspectives from the lens of the labels respondents assign to the specific areas they identify. The resident respondents in the perceptual dialectology work by Niedzielski and Preston (2003) portrayed Oklahoma English, as a whole, in a negative manner. Yet, increasing evidence from perceptual dialectology studies has demonstrated that non-linguists are aware of the variation in linguistic patterns within states and smaller regions (e.g., Bakos, 2013; Evans, 2013; Niedzielski & Preston, 2003; Preston, 1989, 2010; Rensink, 1955, 1999; Sibata, 1971, 1999). As an example, Bakos (2013) revealed that the linguistic awareness of local Oklahomans actually matched the features of their own language production. Bakos (2013) established twelve profiles for the focal respondents, in which he revealed many linguistic features that had been centered on in previous research by other scholars, and compared them against how each individual reported what their own speech was like in the surveys and interviews. He found that the respondents could give an accurate description about their own language features, e.g., level of southernness, of their own language production. Due to prioritizing other issues from the beginning of Bakos' dissertation research, his exploration of the labels assigned and its varieties was not in-depth. In his thesis investigation, Carter (2023) did an empirical study using perceptual dialectology approach and found that the respondents from the city of Tulsa shared similar perceptions on English variation in Oklahoma with respondents from other cities in Oklahoma. Preston (1989) suggests that non-linguists' perception of language variation may to some extent gauge language change. Evans (2013) also based her research on the assumption that perceptual dialectology

research results might be able to provide evidence which would support a more valuable analysis for production variation research, a position taken some time ago by the Japanese dialectologist Misao Tojo (e.g., Tojo, 1953).

Bakos (2013) elicited adjectives which described typical Oklahomans and their speech from a sample of college students at a local university. The most frequent words included “country, friendly, cowboy, farm/farmer, redneck, hick, conservative, hard-working, laid-back, nice” (p. 57). Finding the labeling patterns Oklahomans use on their hand-drawn maps will add depth to this line of research. The purpose of this study is to look into the perception of non-linguist Oklahoma residents concerning varieties of English spoken in the State, largely on the basis of the labels they assign to describe varieties within Oklahoma as they delineated them on blank maps and explained their answer in the immediate following interviews. The specific questions guiding the study include:

- 1) What distinct dialect regions have Oklahoma non-linguists residents identified in their hand-drawn maps?
- 2) What names do the sampled Oklahomans call each of the distinct regions that they have identified?

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Data Collection Instruments*

The current study utilized the hand-drawn map and discussion technique described in Preston and Howe (1987). As discussed, the “draw-a-map” task has been used by many researchers. The map that the respondents were given has an outline of the state of Oklahoma and the names and partial outline of the six neighboring states. The two biggest cities, Oklahoma City and Tulsa, are the only two cities labeled on the map. In Evans’ (2013) study, the map used contained major cities and highways, but the present study follows Benson’s (2003) study of Ohio in which only major cities and the state outline, together with small portions of the neighboring states, were included.

As part of the task protocol, the following instructions were presented to each respondent orally:

Do all the people in Oklahoma talk pretty much the same way, or are there regions in the State where people sound different? I’d like for you to draw those regions for me on this little map, and you can write in any kinds of identifiers you like on the map as well to illustrate the way people talk there or the kinds of people who live there who speak distinctively.

The protocol also contained a note for the fieldworkers: “Please remember to discuss this map with the respondent after he or she has drawn boundaries and written labels.” This discussion allowed participants to verbalize their thoughts that were about the map but that they left out or that needed justification. Respondents sometimes gave explanations or shared examples and experiences from their daily life in the discussion.

### *2.2 Respondents*

The data were collected by graduate students enrolled in seminar classes taught by Professor Dennis Preston and in independent research projects by others between the years of 2009 and 2015. All the data were part of the RODEO project. The author of the current paper was one of the members who made contribution to the RODEO data collection. Forty-one respondents’ data were selected from the pool of data in the RODEO project. The criteria for selection reflect efforts to balance such factors as age, gender, and degree of urbanity, among the sample of selected respondents. All the respondents were European-American and lifelong Oklahoma residents. Table 1 provides information about all the respondents in aggregate from the perspectives of gender, age, and education levels.

Table 1. Demographic information about the participants (n = 41)

	n	%
Gender	41	100
Males	20	48.8
Females	21	51.2
Age (at the time when they were interviewed)	41	100
younger than 20	3	7.3
20s	14	34.1
30s	4	9.8
40s	9	22.0
50s	5	12.2
60s	3	7.3
70s	3	7.3
Education	41	100
High school	7	17.1
Partial college	5	12.2
Bachelor's degree	21	51.2
Master's degree	5	12.2
PhD	3	7.3

The specific hometown locations of the respondents can be seen in Figure 1. The respondents in the RODEO project were also recruited following the method of “friend-of-a-friend” (Milroy, 1980; cited from Cramer, 2013, p. 150). All the forty-one respondents are from twenty-two towns and cities of various sizes in Oklahoma. They include (the number of respondents for each is listed in the parenthesis following the city name): Altus (1), Alva (1), Broken Arrow (1), Checotah (1), Copan (4), Edmond (3), Gage (1), Grove (1), Hennessey (1), Minco (1), Mustang (1), Oklahoma City (3), Orlando (2), Ponca City (2), Sayre (1), Shawnee (1), Spiro (1), Stillwater (9), Tulsa (1), Watts (1), Waynoka (1), and Yale (3).

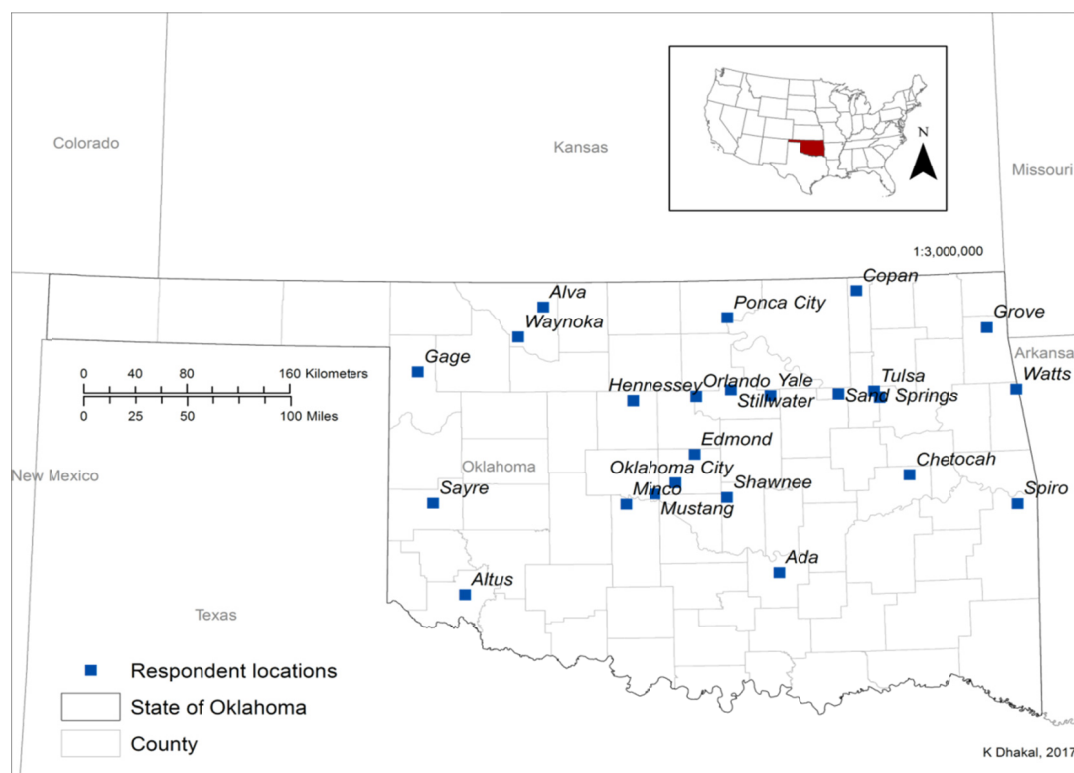


Figure 1. Specific hometown locations of the respondents

*Note.* The figure shows the geographical locations of the hometowns of the forty-one respondents.

### 2.3 Data Analysis Methods

To answer the first research question, “What distinct dialect regions have Oklahoma residents identified in their hand-drawn maps?”, frequency counts were calculated based on participants’ identification of different regions on their paper maps and their discussion of them. For the second research question, “What names do the sampled Oklahomans call each of the distinct regions that they have identified?” dialectologists have employed various methods. Some of them have created their own schemes of labels using grounded theory methods (e.g., Bucholtz et al., 2008), and others have used pre-determined sets to categorize the data (e.g., Bucholtz et al., 2007; Evans, 2013; Hartley & Preston, 1999). For the current study, content analysis, as the main data analysis method in the current study, was carried out on the information or the labels given by the respondents in the map discussion interviews. Labels are revealing about respondents’ attitude or mental maps (Evans, 2012; Bucholtz et al., 2007; Bucholtz et al., 2008; Jeon, 2013). One data analysis technique adopted by the current study is to use the map discussion to assist the understanding of the labels on the maps or to support or confirm the interpretation.

The information on the paper map often includes some labels or comments in the form of short phrases or sentences in addition to single words. The phrases and sentences were treated as chunks, which have been proven fruitful in studies using content analysis methods (Evans, 2012; Jeon, 2013). Some respondents gave many labels, while others wrote down few. Some of them used lines, circles, and arrows to indicate boundaries; others used such symbols to roughly point out certain locations. The current study did not take into consideration the size of the markings, but only took into account the relative locations of the markings and the labels characterizing them. One example map is displayed in Figure 2. Lexical chunks and single word labels from maps were used as data for this study. For Figure 2, such labels as “native American/Mexican American,” “Mexican American/country white,” “proper/urban/country” around Oklahoma City, “proper/urban/country” around Tulsa, “Creole/southern white country” for the area close to southeast corner, were recorded. Map discussion excerpts are used to supplement the understanding of the labels on the map. In the data analysis process, the current study mainly followed the general content analysis method proposed by Bauer (2000).

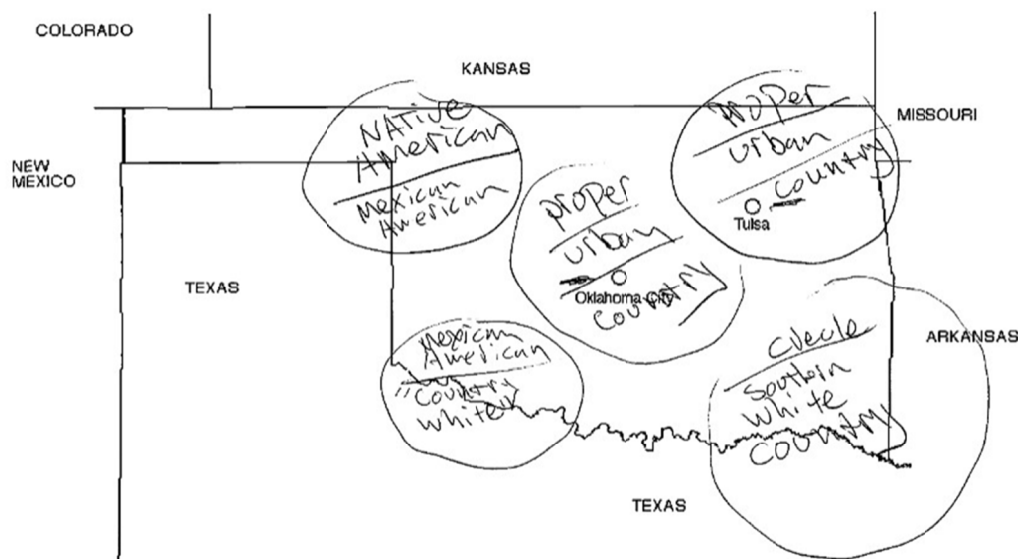


Figure 2. Clarence's map

*Note.* This is the map drawn by a respondent with the fictitious name “Clarence,” who is a male and was 32 years old in the year of 2015, from Oklahoma City, with a high school diploma.

To answer the first research question, which was about dialect regions in respondents’ mental maps, two types of evidence were utilized: a) the groups from content analysis on the map drawing discussion transcripts, which were in essence the labels given to each of the identified regions; b) the markings on the paper maps by the respondents. To answer the second research question, the researcher delved into a few sets of labels, or rather keywords in the labels that have been discussed in the previous literature in the field of dialectological studies. Such groups

included but were not limited to the groups in the following table, Table 2.

Table 2. Examples of potential groups of labels

Example labels	
1)	southern, country, farm*, hillbilly*, rural, hick*, redneck, cowboy
2)	“Native,” “Spanish”, etc.
3)	“slow”, “talk different*”, “thick”, “urbanity”, “towns”, “cities”
4)	Accent, drawl, twang;
5)	“Texas” “Arkansas” etc.

A few dialectological studies have already adopted the distinction between labels for people and labels for speech, while others did not (e.g., Evans, 2012). Evans (2012) did not make a distinction between labels for speech features and those for the features of people when she investigated language attitudes among Washingtonian English speakers. Therefore, “farming,” “cowboy,” and “rural” were included as labels in a single group in her study. Hall-Lew and Stephens (2012) made such a distinction. In fact, their argument is that “country” should be acknowledged as an established or enregistered type of speech. It is different from the connotation that the word “southern” has, and it has surpassed the conventionally acknowledged semantic capacity of “rural” as a label for linguistic variation. Therefore, the key word “country” was one of the search terms in the current study. The current study also made a distinction between labels for the language, the people and the region. Despite this decision, all types of labels were included for analysis as long as they were relevant to a certain dialect region identified.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Research Question 1: Distinct Areas of English Variation

(1) What distinct dialect regions have Oklahoma non-linguists residents identified in their hand-drawn maps? To answer this question, the researcher examined the drawings on each paper map as well as the immediately follow-up map discussion.

When respondents gave labels on a map, it was interpreted that they identified the area in some way. The most agreement amongst participants fell onto the “southeast” (68.3%), followed by “western” (63.4%) and then “southern” (48.8%), the area of Oklahoma bordering Texas. Table 3 shows the numbers of participants who labeled the three most frequently identified regions of Oklahoma based on English variation. The saliency of this last area echoed what Hall-Lew and Stephens (2012) revealed to us in their study, which showed that the southern part of Oklahoma was perceptually very closely related to Texas, based on the interviews with a group of local residents who live in the Texoma area.

Table 3. Participants’ map labels of areas with Oklahoma English variation (N = 41)

Corresponding regions on the paper map	with markings		no markings	
	N	%	N	%
Southeast	28	68.3	13	31.7
Western	26	63.4	15	36.6
Southern border with Texas	20	48.8	21	51.2

Out of the 13 respondents who did not mark the “southeast,” 12 of them marked the “southern” part of Oklahoma, which is the bordering area between Oklahoma and Texas on the paper map. The only exception was Jett, who did not mark either the southern border with Texas or the “southeast” corner of Oklahoma. Jett is from Altus, Oklahoma. On his map, he only marked the cities of “Hobart,” “Altus,” “Lawton,” and “Stillwater.” He gave these cities a label, which is “Oklahoma Slang accent.” He also added a comment close to the top of this paper map, saying, “There is uniform in the rest of Oklahoma.” In the interview, when it was close to the end of the interview, the interviewer asked Jett, “So you think that most Oklahomans sound alike?” Jett answered, “Yes, uniform.”

Apart from these three dialect regions, other regional labels included “eastern” and “northern, northeast corner”, and a few more. More in-depth investigation into the map discussion data in the later part of this paper can throw more lights on the other less distinct dialect regions in respondents’ mental map.

The researcher examined the map discussion interview data carefully, and identified 341 labels in total. To start

with, the 341 labels were categorized into groups based on the regions that each of them described, since the first research question asks what distinct dialect regions were presented in respondents' mental maps. The following table, Table 4, shows the numbers of labels that were used to describe each of the dialect regions.

Table 4. Numbers of labels for different dialect regions

dialect regions mentioned	Number of labels or disclaimers	%
Southeastern Oklahoma	100	29.3
Oklahoma Panhandle	63	18.5
Tulsa and Oklahoma City	57	16.7
Southern Oklahoma	29	8.5
Western Oklahoma	26	7.6
Oklahoma City (only)	18	5.3
Northeastern Oklahoma	17	5.0
Northern Oklahoma	16	4.7
Tulsa (only)	9	2.6
Southwestern Oklahoma	6	1.8
Total	341	100

From the number of tokens of labels received, we can see that the three areas, namely the southeastern Oklahoma, the southern Oklahoma, and the western Oklahoma (Oklahoma panhandle might be part of it when the drawings and markings on the maps are counted) still received the majority number of tokens (namely 218 labels, 63.93%).

### 3.2 Research Question 2: Names for Distinct Areas of English Variation

The second research question is about what names the sampled Oklahomans called each of the distinct regions that they had identified. To answer this question, the researcher examined what labels have been given to each of the identified regions in the first research question. By doing content analysis, the following groups have been established: "redneck," "Levels of urbanity," "Neighboring influences," "slow," "some other adjectives/evaluative labels," "'southern' features," "different," "cowboys," "farm\*," "rural," "country," "metalinguistic comments," "hillbilly," "diversity," "education," "social," "race-related," "metaphorical description," "people," "calling the name of the region," "other languages' influence," "historical features or influence," "city names mentioned," "landscape," "hick\*," "isolation," "example expressions," and lastly "undecided." The following discussion for each of the dialect regions will be related to some of these groups.

#### 3.2.1 The Southeastern Part of Oklahoma

The southeastern part of Oklahoma received one hundred labels or disclaimers from this group of respondents in the map discussion interview. They fell into different groups, as can be seen in the following table, Table 5.

Table 5. Labels for the southeastern part of Oklahoma by respondents

Groups	Numbers of tokens	Percentage (%)
metalinguistic	20	20
neighboring influences	13	13
"different"	11	11
"southern" features	10	10
landscape	8	8
some other adjectives	6	6
social	6	6
"country"	5	5
city names mentioned	4	4
hillbilly	3	3
race-related	2	2
historical features or influences	2	2
hick*	2	2
isolation	2	2
red neck	1	1
levels of urbanity	1	1
metaphorical expression	1	1
people	1	1
example expressions	1	1
education	1	1
Total	100	100



The group with the highest number of tokens is the “metalinguistic comments” group. Respondents gave the following metalinguistic comments to the southeastern part of Oklahoma. From the following excerpts, we can see that respondents mainly talked about the English variation features in the southeastern part of Oklahoma by using such keywords as “accent, dialect, drawn-out, twang, drawl, words, terms, stronger, extreme, hard to understand, mumbling.” The following are the excerpts from respondents’ map discussion.

- 1) “a little more subtle **accent**”
- 2) “our **accent** is more marked”
- 3) “our **accent** is thicker”
- 4) “your thickest **accent**”
- 5) [example of southeastern Oklahoma] “my **accent** is thicker”
- 6) “have its own **dialect**”
- 7) “you can tell the different **dialect** in their voice”
- 8) “more **drawn-out**”
- 9) “more of a **twang**”
- 10) “Arkansas **twang**”
- 11) “more of a southern **drawl**”
- 12) “very thick southern **drawl**”
- 13) [southeast corner of Oklahoma; more towards Arkansas and Louisiana side] “they just have a different **drawl**”
- 14) “they would cut off some **words**”
- 15) “use a lot of **words** that other people don’t know”
- 16) [close to the bordering area between Arkansas and Oklahoma] “**terms** that are not primitive, but back-dated, not so modern”
- 17) “**stronger**” {referring to the accents}
- 18) “more **extreme**” {referring to the accents}
- 19) [the city of McAlester and Pittsburg county] “hard to **understand** them”
- 20) [the city of McAlester and Pittsburg county] “like **mumbling**”

### 3.2.2 The Southern Part of Oklahoma That Is the Bordering Area Between Oklahoma and Texas

Twenty respondents among the forty-one have some kind of marking on the southern border between Oklahoma and Texas, and seventeen of them put labels on the paper maps. Among these, eight tokens are “southern.” In Hall-Lew and Stephens’ (2012) work, even though their respondents were from a community called “Texoma”, which is located on the border area between Texas and Oklahoma, five out of seventeen of their respondents were from Oklahoma. The current study provides additional perspectives on English variation in this area. The other labels used for this area can be seen in the following table.

Table 6. Groups of Labels that the Respondents Used to Talk About English Variation in the “Southern” Part of Oklahoma

Groups	Number of tokens	Percentage (%)
neighboring influences	“Texas” (6)	20.7
levels of urbanity	4	13.8
“southern” features	4	13.8
redneck	3	10.3
some adjectives	3	10.3
slow	2	6.9
different	2	6.9
cowboys	2	6.9
farm*	1	3.4 (3.45)
rural	1	3.4 (3.45)
“country”	1	3.4 (3.45)
Total	29	99.95

### 3.3.3 The Western Area of Oklahoma

Twenty-six out of forty-one respondents (63.4%) gave a label to the western part of the State. In the entire mini-corpus of interview transcripts, for the western area of the State, there are three instances of “slow,” four instances of “rural,” four instances of “country,” and four instances which contain words related to “farm” (e.g., “farmers,” “farming,” and “farms”). On the maps, the western part of Oklahoma, with the Oklahoma Panhandle included, is the only area that has the label of “slow,” which is unusual since “slow” is often a caricature associated with Southern speech and even specifically in some cases to “drawl” (e.g., Bakos, 2013, p. 69). Table 7 shows the labels that this group of respondents assigned to the western area of Oklahoma.

Table 7. Labels for the western area of Oklahoma

Groups	Numbers of tokens	percentage
different	5	19.2
some other adjectives	3	11.5 (11.53)
farm*	3	11.5 (11.53)
levels of urbanity	2	7.7
metalinguistic	2	7.7
calling the name of the region	2	7.7
city names mentioned	2	7.7
slow	1	3.8 (3.84)
“southern” features	1	3.8 (3.84)
cowboys	1	3.8 (3.84)
“country”	1	3.8 (3.84)
people	1	3.8 (3.84)
other languages’ influence	1	3.8 (3.84)
historical features or influence	1	3.8 (3.84)
Total	26	100.0

From the tokens of labels received by the western part of Oklahoma, we can see that almost twenty percent of all the tokens received by the area is in the group of “different.”

Geographically speaking, the Oklahoma panhandle and the western part of Oklahoma are closely related. Therefore, the researcher also looked into the labels by the respondents for the Oklahoma panhandle. That way, we would be clearer about the similarities and differences between the Oklahoma panhandle and the western part of Oklahoma in terms of perceived English variation.

### 3.3.4 The Oklahoma Panhandle

Table 8. Label groups and numbers of tokens for the Oklahoma Panhandle Area

Groups	Numbers of tokens	Percentage (%)
levels of urbanity	10	15.8 (15.87)
metalinguistic	7	11.1
isolation	7	11.1
neighboring influences	(4) “Texas” (2) “neighboring influence”	9.5
slow	5	7.9
different	5	7.9
some other adjectives	4	6.3
rural	3	4.8
undecided	3	4.8
race-related	(3) “native Americans”	4.8
“country”	2	3.2
metaphorical description	2	3.2
non-verbal	2	3.2
farm*	1	1.6
diversity	1	1.6
city names mentioned	1	1.6
landscape	1	1.6
Total	63	100

The most popular labels for the Oklahoma panhandle area, which are all in the “level of urbanity” group. The following are some excerpts in the discussions for the Oklahoma panhandle.

- 1) [panhandle area close to Colorado and New Mexico] “there are less of, like there **aren’t any big towns** up here at all.”
- 2) [panhandle and northern part of Oklahoma] “**less, less, small town**”
- 3) “**three towns**”
- 4) “**not big**”
- 5) “the only one that is known for sure: **Guymon**”
- 6) [from Enid towards the west spreading down the panhandle] “**not many more big towns** out here”
- 7) “people are so **spread out**”
- 8) [from Enid towards the west spreading down the panhandle] “there’s people”
- 9) [from Enid towards the west spreading down the panhandle] “your neighbor might be **ten miles away**”
- 10) [western part of Oklahoma including the panhandle] “**less populated**; people talk more slang”

Among all the respondents, 14 respondents mentioned the Oklahoma panhandle in the map discussion, an area that seems to be special in the State. The shape of the Oklahoma panhandle is slender. Towns are spread out, and so are the residential areas. It is far away from Oklahoma City and Tulsa. All these features make the panhandle area special or unique in the state. When respondents were asked about linguistic variation in the state of Oklahoma, the panhandle area stood out in their mental maps. In the whole corpus of interview transcripts, there are altogether thirty-one instances of the keyword “panhandle.” They are from fourteen respondents. Nineteen instances among the 31 reveal to us the characteristics of linguistic features of the Oklahoma panhandle area. From the nineteen instances, we can see that the English spoken in the Panhandle is given a wide variety of labels: “rural” (3 instances), “slow pace,” “very Texan,” “similar to southwest,” “distinct,” “slower,” “not as wealthy,” “sound like west Texas,” “stereotypical,” “spread out,” “not having the Texas drawl,” “hav(ing) deeper drawl,” “country” (3 instances), “different,” “closer to Northwest Texas or Kansas, or Colorado,” “separate from everybody else,” and “They don’t seem to be like any of the surrounding places.” Bertha, from Edmond, said the Panhandle is “highly influenced by surrounding states”, whereas, Tater from Yale, commented that the Panhandle is “separate from everybody else” and “they don’t seem to be like any of the surrounding places.” Jason, from Tulsa, said that people in the Panhandle “sound like west Texas.” A respondent with the fictitious name “Rose” from Sayre, which is a city in western Oklahoma, commented that people living in the Panhandle have deeper drawl, while Ronald from Copan, a city in the northern part of Oklahoma, said that people in Panhandle, do “not have the Texas drawl.” Among all the respondents who gave a label or labels to the Panhandle area of the State, only Delilah (from Gage) and Rose (from Sayre) are from the western part of the State.

#### 4. Discussion

The impact from place or regionality on linguistic features, or rather impact of the relationship between the speaker and place on linguistic features, has been identified to be crucial based on some research from the production perspective (Reed, 2020). Through looking at the labels the participants gave to the areas on the map, we can also look into Oklahomans’ attitudes towards speech variation. The Discussion section was organized by a few sets of keywords that have been under discussion in dialectological studies.

The following table, Table 9, details the numbers of tokens for the keywords from the forty-one respondents in the map discussion.

Table 9. Numbers of tokens for different labels in the entire dataset of map discussion

Keywords in labels	“southern”	“country”	“farm*”	“rural”	“hillbilly*”	“hick*”	“redneck”	“cowboy”
numbers	29	18	11	8	8	7	5	5

##### 4.1 The Label “Southern”

There are twenty-nine tokens that mentioned the keyword “southern,” which are from nineteen respondents. Their meanings vary. Ten respondents linked the keyword “southern” to the “southeast” part of Oklahoma. This is in alignment with the argument by Labov, Ash, and Boberg (2005, cited from Tillery, 2015, p. 149). That is, compared to the other dialect regions, southeastern part of Oklahoma received the “southern” label from the

highest number of respondents in this group ( $10/41 = 24.4\%$ ). Five respondents used the keyword “southern” in their labels for the southern part of Oklahoma, especially the bordering part between Oklahoma and Texas. Among them, two respondents also linked the speech by Oklahomans from the southern part of the state to being “Texan” or having some features of the Texans’ speech. Six disclaimers by four respondents commented on the relationship between being “southern” and the speech in cities in Oklahoma, including Oklahoma City and Tulsa. Those six disclaimers characterized the speech in the cities, maybe mainly big cities, including Oklahoma City and Tulsa, as less “southern.” One of them, commented that the speech by Oklahoma residents outside of Oklahoma City is “southern real Oklahoman accent.” None of the forty-one respondents described the speech by local residents in panhandle as “southern.” Carter’s (2023) investigation through the help of map-drawing task also found that Oklahoma panhandle is a distinct linguistic area that has been identified as in isolation.

Ten tokens of “southern” appeared in map discussion interviews, whereas in the entire mini-corpus of transcription there were altogether seventeen tokens of labels with the keyword “southern.” Among these seventeen instances, however, seven contained the quantifier “more,” as in “more southern.” This seemed to imply that non-linguists are aware of layers or degrees of southernness in Oklahoma. Different “official” documents conceptualized “the South” in the United States, seemingly “not radically differ” (Cramer & Preston, 2018), as either including part of, the entire of, or none of the state of Oklahoma. It should also be noted that the keyword “redneck” also conveyed the value judgment on Oklahomans’ English speech by the hearers, in regard to being “southern” (Chun, 2018).

#### 4.2 The Label “Country”

There are altogether eighteen tokens of “country”, from nine respondents. Their meanings also vary. Some respondents link the label “country” to influences from Texas, or Arkansas. Some of them said that Oklahoma City did not demonstrate the features of being “country” at all. One respondent commented that Oklahoma City and Tulsa have a mixed feature of being “country” and urban. In fact, out of the eighteen tokens of “country,” six was given by this respondent. This respondent was 32 years old when interviewed and from Oklahoma City, with a high school education.

Looking into the labels with the keyword “country,” the following table recorded the findings. The first row tells what area the labels with the keyword “country” were for.

Table 10. The label “country” given to different regions in Oklahoma

	southeast	Tulsa and Oklahoma City [to illustrate the opposite of “country” or the mixture of “country” and “urban”]	Southern part of Oklahoma and especially the part closer to Texas	panhandle	western
# of tokens and # of respondents	7 tokens 6 respondents	5 tokens 3 respondents	3 tokens 2 respondents	2 tokens 2 respondents	1 token 1 respondent

Only two respondents gave the label “country” to talk about the speech features of the local residents in the area close to the border between Oklahoma and Texas. The interesting thing is one of the two respondents gave on the map the same disclaimer “rural” to both the Oklahoma panhandle and the southern part of Oklahoma close to the bordering area between Oklahoma and Texas, but in the map discussion, he only described the speech in the bordering area between Oklahoma and Texas as “country,” as can be seen from the following excerpt:

Joe: Ok, I would say as opposed to any one region in Oklahoma I do believe the southern part, closer you get to Texas I think there’s a lot more rural areas down here. So I think they may have somewhat more of a **country** hick accent.”

Hall-Lew and Stephens’ (2012) study recruited local residents as respondents, whereas respondents in the current study were also local Oklahomans but none of them is from the Texoma area. They commented on other regions in Oklahoma regarding how residents from smaller local communities demonstrated the features of “country” talk in their speech.

The key question whether “country” talk can be enregistered, not only needs input from local residents, but also demands a relatively high degree of agreement from some outsiders who are familiar with or at least have some exposure to the speech of the local community.

### 4.3 The Label “Drawl”

Table 11. The label “drawl” for different regions in Oklahoma

	Southeastern Oklahoma	Southern Oklahoma, especially the part close to Texas	Western Oklahoma, including Oklahoma panhandle	Northern part of Oklahoma	Opposite of having a drawl: Oklahoma City and Tulsa	Texas	Arkansas
“drawl”	4 respondents	1	2 (drawl)	2	3	1 (drawl)	1

Ronald, a respondent from Copan, in his forties when interviewed, expressed that he did not think that there was a drawl, to be exact “Texas drawl”, in local residents’ speech in the panhandle of Oklahoma. Instead, he thought that there was a drawl, to quote him “a different drawl,” in the speech by people who are residents in the southeast corner of Oklahoma, more towards Arkansas and Louisiana side. To emphasize, he added a comment that, he did not observe that feature of “a different drawl” outside of the southeastern corner of Oklahoma.

### 4.4 The Label “Twang”

Table 12. The label “twang” for different regions in Oklahoma

	Dialect regions	Labels	Respondents
1)	Southeast Oklahoma	“more of a twang”	One respondent (Amanda)
2)	Southeast Oklahoma	“Arkansas twang”	One respondent (Melvin)

This group of respondents did not use the keyword “twang” a lot to talk about the speech features in Oklahoma. As we can see from Table 12, only two respondents each used one token of “twang” and one token of “Arkansas twang” to talk about the English speech feature in southeastern Oklahoma.

In the entire mini-corpus of interview transcript, there were altogether 11 tokens of “twang” but from only four respondents out of the forty-one. On the hand-drawn maps, the label “drawl” was more popular than the label “twang”. Only one token of the label “twang” was explicitly listed on a map. There were a few tokens of “drawl” from different respondents and placed at different positions on their hand-drawn maps. Among the four who mentioned “twang,” one respondent is from Alva, another respondent from Spiro. Ed (from Hennessey) mentioned both “twang” and “drawl,” and Melvin (from Waynoka) used a phrase “Arkansas twang.”

## 5. Conclusion

The current study is an attempt to explore the mental boundaries that non-linguist Oklahoma residents maintained and the labels they assigned to describe linguistic variation in Oklahoma English with a relatively larger sample than previous research. Labels given by local Oklahoman non-linguists residents have shown to be highly informative in terms of how respondents perceive English variation in the state of Oklahoma. From the paper maps, the current study illustrated that the most agreed-upon dialectological variety lies in the southeastern part of Oklahoma, followed by the western part and then the southern part of Oklahoma.

After doing content analysis with the labels, eight geographical areas in Oklahoma were found to have received different numbers of tokens of labels. Twenty-eight groups emerged from all the labels retrieved from the paper maps and map discussion interviews. After looking at the labels, three most distinct areas stood out: the southeastern Oklahoma, the western part of Oklahoma (including the Oklahoma panhandle), and the southern part of Oklahoma. It was found that the southeastern Oklahoma is highly influenced by Arkansas. The western part of Oklahoma is known for its slowness, which is oddly not connected to “drawl.” This group of respondents used “drawl” almost exclusively for the southeastern part of Oklahoma, instead of the western part. The bordering area between Oklahoma and Texas, roughly the southern part of Oklahoma, is also a distinct area in this sample of respondents’ mental maps. The label category with the highest number of tokens is the category of “neighboring influences,” especially from Texas with six tokens, rather than the “country” label with one token, which was enregistered in Hall-Lew and Stephens (2012). This group of respondents assigned more tokens of “country” to other regions of Oklahoma than the southern bordering area between Oklahoma and Texas. The two major cities, Oklahoma City and Tulsa, have a higher status profile in respondents’ linguistic perception. Respondents linked the connotation of the label “drawl” to slowness of speech, small town atmosphere, and the level of urbanity. In the

dataset, the label “drawl” is much more popular than the label “twang.”

The current study has many limitations, with the small pool of respondents being one of them. Further investigation into a bigger pool of Oklahomans with more meticulous examination would make a bigger contribution to delineating Oklahoman non-linguists’ mental map of English variation in Oklahoma.

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