

Hillbillies, Schmucks and Gangsters: A Perceptual Dialectology Study of the Greater Toronto Area

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Studies of attitudes toward language have been shown to complement studies of language variation, revealing speaker perceptions of dialect regions and the salient linguistic features associated with those regions (Preston 1989, 1999, 2011). However, despite numerous studies of variation in Canadian English (see e.g. Boberg 2010, Walker 2015), there has been little work investigating language attitudes in Canada (e.g. Dailey-O’Cain & McKinnie, 2002) and none in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The current study explores the perceptions of short- and long-term residents of the varieties of English spoken in the GTA. The primary goals of this study are 1) to determine whether there are any perceptual-dialectological boundaries in the GTA and 2) to determine what features distinguish areas of the GTA as linguistically distinct, according to residents (cf. Bijvoet & Fraurud’s (2012) study of Stockholm). This study uses methodological procedures similar to Preston (1989; 2011) and Evans (2011) as the basis for data collection. Fifty-four postsecondary and recently graduated postsecondary students completed a questionnaire that gathered information about their demographic profile, including language use and social networks, before engaging in a map task that asked them to indicate which areas of the GTA have English that sounds different from their own, grammatically, lexically and/or phonetically, and to label these regions. Results reveal that residents divide the GTA according to different ways of speaking and harbour mixed attitudes towards the English of these areas. Specific areas highlighted by participants included Brampton, downtown Toronto, Markham, Richmond Hill, Scarborough and Vaughan and examples of labels given to regions include: ‘snobby’, ‘gangster slang’, and ‘hillbillies’. Participants distinguished named regions on the basis of ‘accent’ and ‘slang’. Findings suggest that an important factor contributing to a participant’s likelihood of labelling and highlighting areas on the map task was the participant’s familiarity with regions of the GTA. The results of this initial study, which provide some insight into perceptions of the English spoken in the GTA, not only complement ongoing studies of variation in linguistic production (e.g. Hoffman & Walker 2010), but they also support the validity of conducting studies of perceptual dialectology in smaller domains.

Keywords: Canadian English, folk linguistics, language attitudes, perceptual dialectology

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