Place-linked Expectations and Listener Awareness of Regional Accents

Katie Carmichael
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

1. Introduction

It has been demonstrated that listeners have distinct ideas about the relationship between regional accents and where a speaker is from (Clopper & Pisoni 2006b, 2007; Preston 1989, 1996). This knowledge represents a certain kind of sociolinguistic awareness: the awareness that there exists some link between a speaker’s language practices and their home region or place of origin. Indeed, individuals share many common stereotypes about regional (place-linked) dialects, even if they have little exposure to speakers of these dialects in their day-to-day lives (Hartley & Preston 1999; Preston 1989, 1996). Likewise, when presented with linguistic stimuli, listeners form distinct social impressions in response (Callan et al 1983; Luhman 1990), and listeners’ reactions to speakers can sometimes depend on where they determine the speaker to be from—whether they are correct in that determination or not (Campbell-Kibler 2009; Williams 1989). However, there has been little work addressing the space between these abstract sociolinguistic stereotypes about regional accents, and speakers’ in-the-moment social judgments when presented with regional speech forms. The current study seeks to fill this gap by posing the question: how do listeners make use of their sociolinguistic awareness about language and place when presented with novel linguistic input?

Multiple methodological approaches were combined in this study to examine this question: participants completed a listening task, free-listing task, perceptual dialectology map task, and follow-up interview. These tasks were designed to assess participants’ social and linguistic associations with certain places, and the dialects linked to those locales. In the listening task, I manipulated level of accentedness and speakers’ reported hometown to investigate how listeners make use of their mental schema connecting place and regional accents when presented with linguistic stimuli. In addition to examining how this awareness is used in action, this paper
discusses some of the ways that this awareness is built, by analyzing how participants describe their reactions to the tasks, and the resources they appealed to in completing the tasks.

Responses to the four tasks suggested that participants’ knowledge of given places, and the social and linguistic qualities associated with them, built up a set of expectations that was exploited in order to make sense of the linguistic input they were presented with. A number of participants implied a deterministic link between where one is from and what their accent will sound like. In effect, by treating accent as dependent entirely on where one is from, these participants denied speakers from places where accentedness is expected any level of control over nonstandard, regionally-linked features. Additionally, it was found that personal experience and media representations were the main resources participants used to build their sociolinguistic awareness of the relationship between regional accents and place.

The results discussed in this paper indicate that listeners make active use of their knowledge about the connections between regional accents and the social/place-linked meanings attached to these language practices, employing this awareness when presented with new linguistic input. They also rely on assumptions about speaker control over dialectal features, in order to resolve mismatches between their expectations of accentedness and what they encounter in-the-moment. The findings discussed in this chapter build on our understanding of how place-linked associations play into sociolinguistic awareness more generally, and answers recent calls (e.g. Becker 2009; Daleszynska 2011) for sociolinguists to complexify our conceptions of place, and the role that speakers’ ideas about language and place can have in the production and perception of sociolinguistic identity.

2. Awareness, control, and regional accents
Speakers’ awareness of, and control over, linguistic variables has always been relevant to the study of sociolinguistic variation. Much of the treatment of these issues within variationist sociolinguistics has been affected by the initial
assumptions of William Labov, who designed early data collection methods around the idea that the amount of attention a speaker paid to their speech would affect their realization of certain socially meaningful linguistic variants (e.g. 2006[1966], 1972, 1984). Within this approach, Labov (1972) also accounted for the fact that some linguistic variation was not socially meaningful because it was below the level of consciousness. His concepts of stereotypes, markers, and indicators (listed in order from highest level of awareness to lowest) furthermore contained assumptions about speaker control—that is, Labov theorized that it is the features that speakers are most aware of that they have the greatest control over.

Another way Labov affected sociolinguists’ conceptions of speaker awareness and control was by introducing the idea of The Observer’s Paradox, which can be summarized as the problematic aim of observing the way people speak when they are not being observed. The idea behind this line of thinking is that if speakers are made aware of someone listening for meaningful variation in their speech, they will exert control over the forms they use, thereby producing data that is somehow disingenuous compared to the “true vernacular.” And indeed, Labov (2006[1966]:86) identifies the vernacular as the paramount interest of sociolinguists, explaining that it is “the language first acquired by the language learner, controlled perfectly, and used primarily among intimate friends and family members.” Again, the issue of control comes up, this time in a slightly different way, where it is suggested that speakers do not exert the same level of control over non-vernacular, or self-aware, forms of language. It is likely for this reason that the study of performed speech was not pursued within sociolinguistics until more recently (e.g. Schilling-Estes 1998; Johnstone 1999; Carmichael 2013), even though anthropology and folklore took a performance turn in the sixties. It has been demonstrated since then that performed speech shows systematic patterning (Schilling-Estes 1998) and represents a useful tool for understanding the local perception of certain linguistic features (Carmichael 2013). But as a whole, the assumptions that form the very basis of sociolinguistic inquiry—that speakers are variably aware of different linguistic features, and that if their attention is drawn
toward them they may exert control over them—have remained relatively unchanged throughout the history of sociolinguistics.

That is not to say that other researchers have not theorized about speaker awareness and control. Le Page & Tabouret-Keller’s (1985) “Acts of Identity” model incorporated social theory in order to capture some of the driving forces behind variation. Their model suggested that speakers must possess some level of sociolinguistic awareness, associating specific linguistic patterns to particular social groups, furthermore suggesting that speakers must exert some level of control over their language practices in order to emulate certain patterns or diverge from them, depending on level of affiliation with that social group.

More recently, within the frame of sociocultural linguistics Bucholtz & Hall (2005, 2008) have pursued the role of speaker agency, or an individual’s ability to make active decisions about their own social/linguistic actions, particularly as expressions of identity. Bucholtz & Hall (2005) discussed the tension between structure and agency within sociolinguistic research: how much of our linguistic choices are deliberate and purposeful, and how much of them are the result of habit? Like Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, Bucholtz & Hall attribute a high level of awareness and control to speakers.

In contrast with those studies mentioned, work on accommodation has sought to account for the sometimes automatic or unconscious linguistic shifts speakers make. Some of these theories have depended on audience (Bell 1984; Giles, Coupland, & Coupland 1991), while more recent studies have focused on linguistic changes made in response to unconscious triggers (Hay & Drager 2010). These studies test the limits of awareness, showing that speakers have control over linguistic variation even in instances in which the speaker is unaware of their actions. Such mismatch between awareness and control has also been pursued in research on regional, or place-linked, linguistic features. In the city of Pittsburgh, the pronunciation of words such as “downtown” with monophthongal /aw/ (“dahntahn”) has entered into many speakers’ awareness of local speech patterns, and is frequently actively employed to index a Pittsburgh-linked identity (Johnstone, Bhasin, & Wittkofski 2002; Johnstone Andrus, & Danielson 2006). However,
Johnstone & Kiesling (2008) found that some speakers use monophthongal /aw/ in their speech without being conscious of its social meaning, demonstrating that awareness of linguistic features and control of them do not always co-occur.

Rather than examining awareness and control in terms of an individual speaker in a specific interaction, as is done in many of the studies discussed above, the current study focuses on listeners’ awareness on a broader level by examining general awareness of the relationship between place and regional accent, and how that relates to social judgments about speakers said to be from a given place. As Johnstone (2004) points out, from the beginning of variationist research, with its roots in dialect geography, place has been used as an explanatory factor for linguistic variation. But only recently have more sociolinguistic researchers been examining how individuals conceive of their relationship with certain places and the linguistic features tied to them.

Some work has been completed establishing awareness of a link between place and regional accents, with perhaps the best known evidence for this coming from Preston’s (1989, 1996, 1997) perceptual dialectology research, and the subsequent studies that followed in this thread (Bucholtz et al 2007; Fought 2002; Hartley & Preston 1999; Iannàccaro & Dell’Aquila 2001). In perceptual dialectology map tasks, participants are asked to mark on a map where people “speak with an accent,” or “speak most correct,” and there is often a high level of agreement in terms of perceptions. Such findings demonstrate that there exist a number of agreed-upon perceptions and stereotypes about certain places and the linguistic features associated with that place.

Examining the link between places and regional accents from an experimental approach, dialect classification tasks such as those administered by Clopper & Pisoni (2006b, 2007) have demonstrated that overall, naive listeners are quite skilled at determining a speaker’s place of origin based on linguistic input alone. Moreover, this place-accent link may be manipulated in perception tasks (Niedzielski 1999; Campbell-Kibler 2009). Niedzielski presented listeners from Detroit with vowel tokens featuring varying levels of Canadian raising, asking them to identify the vowel. Half of the listeners believed the speaker was from Detroit and
half believed the speaker to be Canadian. Overwhelmingly, speakers identified as Canadian were heard as featuring raised vowel variants, while vowel tokens from those believed to be from Detroit were categorized as unraised, regardless of the actual variant heard. In Campbell-Kibler’s study of the social perception of (ING), the effect of place on social judgments was investigated by presenting audio clips of speakers from California and North Carolina in which the only difference was whether the speaker said /ɪn/ or /ɪŋ/. Regardless of variant used, Southern speakers were judged low on intelligence. For Californian stimuli, only speakers perceived as working class were downrated when they used the alveolar variant. Campbell-Kibler interprets this patterning as a result of southern speakers already being downrated for their accent and thus not being able to be further downrated for their use of alveolar (ING). This patterning of results demonstrated that where a speaker is from affects listeners’ social perceptions of linguistic features.

The studies discussed above present varied perspectives on the relationship between awareness and control, and further establish that many speakers possess a general awareness of the link between place and regional accents, the relationship between which will be examined more closely throughout the rest of this paper.

3. Methodology
Participants in this study completed a matched guise listening task, a questionnaire (including free-listing task), a perceptual dialectology map task, and a follow-up interview, in groups of one to three. While the listening task, questionnaire, and perceptual dialectology map task were all completed individually, follow-up interviews were completed as a group. A total of 83 participants completed the tasks, but the data were discarded for 22 people who were either not from Ohio or did not speak English natively. Because the study dealt with sociolinguistic perceptions about U.S. dialects as a whole, it was thought that limiting the analyzed data to native English speakers from Ohio would mitigate to a certain extent the effect of participants’ varying experiences with different U.S. dialects. The sample for this study thus consisted of 61 Ohio State undergraduates, balanced across male
(28) and female (33) participants; 50 of the participants were white, with the remaining participants identifying as Black (3), Hispanic (1), Asian (6), or mixed (1). Ages ranged from 18 to 37, with a median participant age of 21 years old. Participants received class credit (if they were enrolled in linguistics classes) or $10 for their time, depending on recruitment source.

The listening task represented a modified matched guise, designed based on previous speaker evaluation studies (e.g. Lambert et al 1960; Anisfeld et al 1962; Milroy & McClenaghan 1977). I specify that the task was “modified” from traditional matched guise tasks in that spontaneous speech was used, thus the content of the utterances presented as stimuli was not identical. During this task, each participant was situated at a separate computer with Bose Quiet Comfort 15 acoustic noise-cancelling headphones, and stimuli were presented using eprime 2.0 software. Participants heard recordings of Southern, Midlands, Western, and Mid-Atlantic speakers from the Nationwide Speech Corpus (Clopper & Pisoni 2006a); on the top of the screen participants saw the speaker’s pseudonym, age, and reported place of origin—whether Birmingham, Alabama; Columbus, Ohio; or New York, New York. These places were chosen because they represent three areas of the United States with strong social and linguistic ideologies tied to them. New York City English (New York) and Southern English (Birmingham) are both marked, stigmatized dialects within the United States, which have been shown to pattern with negative judgments about speakers (e.g. Preston 1996, 1997). In contrast, Columbus, Ohio is located within the Midwest, a more linguistically “unmarked” area which is ideologically tied to so-called standard language varieties (Bonfiglio 2002). In addition, the study took place in Columbus, Ohio, making this location all the more an unmarked baseline for many participants. In addition to indicating where speakers were “from,” I included names and ages for each speaker in an attempt to make speakers’ reported hometown stand out less as the variable being tested. However, participants were asked to pay special attention to the information about each speaker under the premise that they would need to give reactions to specific speakers during the follow-up interviews, lending some confidence that participants did note speakers’ hometowns.
The goal of the listening task was to manipulate the pairing of regional accentedness and where listeners were told the speaker was from, such that in some cases, this information matched, but in others it did not. Although none of the speakers were actually from any of the three cities used in the current study, it was considered a perceptual “match" if the speaker was from the dialect area in which that city is located—except of course, in the case of Western speakers, who were treated as equivalent to Midlands speakers for the purposes of this study. The intended perceptual result of this manipulation was that some speakers said to be from Birmingham and New York sounded more regionally accented than others. Participants rated speakers along a visual analog scale for eleven social qualities (selected based on past speaker evaluation research, e.g. Zahn & Hopper 1985), listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educated</th>
<th>Uneducated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper class</td>
<td>Lower class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smart</td>
<td>Dumb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accented</td>
<td>Unaccented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polite</td>
<td>Rude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>Unfriendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasant</td>
<td>Unpleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>Dishonest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaks well</td>
<td>Speaks poorly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the listening task, participants filled out a questionnaire aimed at finding out socio-demographic information about each participant. The questionnaire also included a free-listing task in which participants were asked to write the first three words that came to mind when they thought of people from each place, in order to get an idea of what place-based evaluations participants came in with. Finally, the questionnaire asked participants if they believed people from the three places to be
accented, and if they thought they had an accent themselves. Although the terms presented in the listening task could affect choice of terms in the free-listing task, it would likely only be in terms of breadth of descriptors; in contrast, if the free-listing task was completed before the listening task, it is possible that participants would rate speakers according to the abstract stereotypes about a given place that they had just reported, rather than in response to the linguistic stimuli presented. Since an essential goal of this study was to examine how participants reacted in-the-moment to linguistic input, it was crucial not to bias the listening task. In addition, since the listening task rotated the accentedness of speakers across different places—in that half of the speakers from each place were more “accented” and half were less “accented”—it was assumed that the listening task stimuli would not shift participant expectations in terms of overall accentedness linked to a given place.

For the third task in the experiment, participants were given a blank map of the United States and asked to mark where people speak with an accent and to provide descriptive labels and examples if possible. This task served to uncover the participants’ ideologies about place-based linguistic variation.

Lastly, follow-up interviews provided an opportunity to ask about reactions to the listening task, clarify questionnaire responses, and discuss or refine reasoning behind markings on the perceptual dialectology maps. Participants were also asked about their experiences with each place, with the goal of obtaining richer descriptions of the ideological associations with New York, Birmingham, and Columbus.

4. Results

4.1 Listening Task
A detailed treatment of listening task results may be found in Carmichael (submitted), although general findings will be summarized in this section. Listening task ratings were submitted to factor analysis in order to determine the driving factors in the data, which I will refer to hereafter as status, solidarity, and
accentedness. The factor I am calling status is most heavily weighted for *dumb, uneducated, speaks poorly,* and *lower class* ratings, while the factor I refer to as solidarity is most heavily weighted for *rude, unfriendly,* and *unpleasant.* Together, status and solidarity accounted for 40% of the variance in the data—perhaps unsurprising, since these two dimensions have come up frequently in past speaker evaluation studies (Callan et al 1983; Luhman 1990; Edwards 1999; Milroy & Preston 1999). A third factor accounted for a further 7% of the variance in the data; it was most strongly (negatively) weighted for unaccented ratings, for which reason I refer to it as accentedness. Interestingly, perceived accentedness did not always coincide with the speakers who featured marked Southern or New York dialects, in that some Midlands/Western (“unmarked”) speakers were also rated as accented by participants in this study. Throughout the rest of the paper, thus, I will refer to accentedness of speakers according to perceived accentedness that participants established based on their ratings. A final consideration that will be discussed in this section will be the variable of city-country, which came up repeatedly in the free-listing task, map task, and follow-up interviews, suggesting it is important to consider in relation to the other three factors.

Overall, speakers said to be from New York and Birmingham were rated lower along the status dimension than speakers said to be from Columbus—except in the case of speakers said to be from Columbus who were perceived as accented. In contrast with “unaccented” Columbusites, speakers said to be from Columbus who were perceived as accented generally received similarly low status ratings to speakers said to be from New York or Birmingham. This patterning recalls the effects Campbell-Kibler (2009) found in her (ING) data. She found that regardless of whether Southerners used the nonstandard (ING) variant, they were downrated in speaker evaluations, while speakers “who could be from anywhere” featured more nuanced effects, depending on perceived class of the speaker.

Solidarity ratings revealed a bias towards speakers said to be from Birmingham, who were rated high on solidarity regardless of perceived accentedness. Interestingly, speakers said to be from Birmingham were in fact
uprated if they were perceived as accented. This differs substantially from the relationship between solidarity ratings and perceived accentedness for speakers said to be from Columbus or New York, who received lower solidarity ratings the more accented they were. Correlations between accentedness and solidarity ratings for each place may be seen in Figure 1, where the darkest, thickest line represents data for speakers said to be from Birmingham.

Figure 1: Accentedness and solidarity ratings for speakers said to be from Birmingham, New York, and Columbus

Figure 1 demonstrates the negative correlation between accentedness and solidarity for speakers said to be from Columbus and New York, which is all the more interesting taken in combination with city-country ratings. As expected based on past studies (e.g. Preston 1996, 1999), as well as results for the other tasks in the
current study (see the following section), speakers said to be from Birmingham
were overwhelmingly rated as country and those from New York were rated as city.
However, speakers said to be from New York who were perceived as less accented
were rated less “city” than those perceived to be accented. This interaction did not
hold for Birmingham speakers, who were rated as country regardless of perceived
accentedness. Those speakers said to be from Columbus featured a mixture of
city/country ratings, perhaps unsurprising since Columbus is a smaller city
characterized by suburban sprawl blending out into countryside. However, a closer
look at which speakers were rated city and which were rated country revealed some
interesting interactions with the other factors of interest. To begin with, those
speakers said to be from Columbus who were rated as more “country” were also the
speakers perceived as most accented. Furthermore, these same speakers took a hit
on solidarity ratings, seemingly downrated for their “country” accents. Examining
the speakers said to be from Columbus who were rated more “city,” we encounter a
similar correlation with accentedness, in that “city” Columbusites were those
perceived as least accented. Moreover, these same “city” Columbusites were uprated
along the status dimension. This patterning is particularly interesting in
combination with findings for New Yorkers, for whom “cityness” was positively
correlated with perceived accentedness. That is, a New Yorker who is more
accented is seen as more “city”, while a Columbusite who is more accented is seen as
more “country.” The reasons for this conflicting patterning will be examined in
further detail in following sections.

To summarize, listening task results revealed interactions between the
factors of status, solidarity, accentedness, and the city-country spectrum. While
speakers said to be from Birmingham were rated country whether they were
perceived as accented or not, they received higher solidarity ratings if perceived as
accented. Speakers said to be from New York were consistently rated as “city,” but
speakers perceived as less accented were also rated as less city. Finally, ratings for
speakers said to be from Columbus were highly dependent on perceived
accentedness, with those speakers perceived as accented rated more “country” and
downrated on solidarity. In contrast, Columbus speakers perceived as less accented
were rated as more “city” and received higher status ratings. Table 1 presents these findings below.

**Table 1: Listening Task Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Speakers said to be from <strong>Birmingham</strong></th>
<th>Speakers said to be from <strong>Columbus</strong></th>
<th>Speakers said to be from <strong>New York</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speakers perceived as <strong>more accented</strong></td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Solidarity</td>
<td>Low Solidarity</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speakers perceived as <strong>less accented</strong></td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>(less) City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>---</td>
<td>High Status</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I will argue in the discussion section that this patterning of results, in combination with findings from the other tasks, reflects listeners employing their expectations about the relationship between place, regional accents, and other social qualities. In the next section, I will examine data from the other tasks to clarify the structure of participants’ sociolinguistic awareness relating to place and regional accents while identifying some of the strategies listeners employed to reconcile new linguistic input that did not match with their mental schema entering into the experiment.

**4.2 Questionnaire, perceptual dialectology map task, and follow-up interview results**

Because results for the questionnaires, map task, and follow-up interviews presented some interactions and related patterns, they will be discussed together in this section.

Questionnaires included a free-listing task in which participants were asked to list the first three words that came to mind when thinking of Birmingham, Alabama; Columbus, Ohio; and New York, New York. To provide a visual representation of word frequency, a word cloud for each place was generated using Wordle (Feinberg 2009), the results of which are presented in Figures 2, 3, and 4. In
these Wordle graphics, the size of the font indicates word frequency: the larger the word, the more instances of that word there were in the free-listing task. The largest words thus demonstrate a consensus amongst participants about the relative representativeness of that term for a given place. Moreover, a Wordle graphic with many large words—especially semantically related large words—indicates a higher level of agreement between participants.

Figure 2: Word Cloud for Birmingham

Figure 2 shows that three main words showed up repeatedly in the free-listing task for Birmingham: “country”, “southern”, and “accent”. “Country” appeared 26 times, “southern” 21 times, and “accent” 14 times. Notably, 63% of participants who listed a word related to “accent” (including “southern accent” and “accented”) also listed one related to “country” (including “hillbilly,” “rural,” and “farmers”). Furthermore, words relating to high solidarity, such as “polite,” “hospitable,” “friendly,” “kind,” and “honest” appear relatively frequently as well. This patterning mirrors the correlations in the listening task between country ratings, accentedness, and high solidarity ratings for speakers said to be from Birmingham.
Figure 3: Word Cloud for Columbus

Figure 3 presents the word cloud for Columbus, which looks very different from the word cloud for Birmingham. Rather than being occupied by a few words that were very frequent, most words consisted of single tokens—except for the word “friendly,” which appeared on 15 different questionnaires. The next most common term was “normal” (perhaps an unsurprising descriptor, given that every participant lived in Columbus or its environs at the time of the experiment), which still only featured 6 tokens. This complex constellation of terms may relate to participants’ differing experiences with Columbus as a place or to its lack of national stereotypes; in contrast, many described Birmingham or New York in terms of stereotypes or representations in media.

Figure 4: Word Cloud for New York City
The word cloud for New York City (Figure 4) appears to represent the middle ground between the word cloud for Columbus, which featured many single token descriptors, and that for Birmingham, which was dominated by a few frequently repeated words. Words like “city” (16), “rude” (12), and “busy” (18) appeared at the highest rates, while “accent” appeared relatively frequently as well (6—which is about half as frequent as for Birmingham, but still more than Columbus’ 2 “accent” tokens).

Considered together, these free-listing results indicate higher expectations of accentedness for speakers from New York and Birmingham than for those from Columbus. This claim is bolstered by perceptual dialectology map results, which revealed that participants almost always marked areas including Birmingham and New York, while less than half of the participants marked an area including Columbus—which may further indicate its less marked linguistic status.

Furthermore, when asked if people from Columbus have accents, survey responses overwhelmingly indicated that they are unaccented, plain, or normal.

*Do people from Columbus, Ohio have accents? If so, what do they sound like?*

- **33:** They sound almost “accentless” like they are newscasters.
- **10:** No – they sound like me
- **11:** People from Columbus, Ohio have typical mid-western accents – we sound like what is typically thought of when one thinks about American English – Plain with mostly even stress.
- **31:** No accents here!
- **35:** Yes. I don’t know I come from Central Ohio, I can’t hear this accent.
- **41:** Not that I can hear.
- **42:** Yes, very plain sounding. A constant speed.
- **44:** None that I can really hear. It seems very Midwest – like news anchors.
- **47:** No, it is a very language-neutral place.
- **57:** I don’t notice the Midwest accent. I’m sure they sound like they have accents to people from other regions.

The concept of Midwestern accents being neutral or those adopted by news anchors carried over to the perceptual dialectology maps. For example, even when looking at the maps of participants who marked Columbus, the labels for these areas included words and phrases presented below.
• Midwestern/Midland
• Midwest accent “plain”
• Midwest, typically considered Standard American English
• Mid-west, this is what I have so I can’t hear the accent
• Midwest dialects that newscasters love
• Nonregional diction (newscaster)
• Normal accent
• Normal speaking rate, clearer speech
• Neutral

Many of these responses seem to acknowledge the standard, unmarked quality of Columbus, Ohio (and other Midwestern) accents. Preston (1996) found that the labels most commonly assigned to the Midwest and Inland North (Great Lakes area) were positive words such as “standard, regular, normal, and everyday” (306). Figures 5, 6, and 7 show some examples of these labels; in the case of Figure 6, “normal accent” encompasses an area that includes all of the West.

**Figure 5: Participant 17’s perceptual dialectology map**
Figure 6: Participant 43’s perceptual dialectology map

Figure 7: Participant 58’s perceptual dialectology map
The idea of Columbus as representing a “normal” or “standard” region (in terms of language as well as social qualities) came up in follow-up interviews as well, as demonstrated below.

32: Where I’m from [in Northern Ohio], people are much less pleasant than people in Columbus, but I still think people in Columbus are like normal that's what I said [in the free-listing task].
31: Yeah I would say like I guess normal.
32: It’s just normal average just—
31: Yeah I would say I would group the Midwest as just pretty average.
...
33: I grew up here so people don’t usually like comment on it [accents], but I’ve always been told that Ohio accents are kind of like accentless, like that’s what newscasters go for?
32: mm-hm. I’ve always heard that too.

13: It's often looked at as a, uh, Ohio as just a neutral accent. And I see it often used as a reference point of "okay you—we don't have an accent" or what the newscasters go for.
INTERVIEWER: So the word normal seems to have come up for both of you. So where do you think on your map people speak the most normal English?
14: The Midwest.
INTERVIEWER: Anywhere in particular or just sort of generally?

In contrast, the abnormal and nonstandard quality of Birmingham and New York varieties of English was frequently pointed out on maps and in interviews. For example, while labels for the Birmingham-inclusive areas usually included some version of “southern/south” (98%) or “country” (14%), other words included more linguistic labels such as “twang,” “drawl,” “y’all,” or a combination of all of these words. The most common linguistic commentary on New York City speech was accomplished by providing examples of r-less words such as “cah” for “car.”

On maps as well as in follow-up interviews, frequent reference was made to political figures with notable accents and/or strong ties to their home states (e.g. Sarah Palin on participant 17’s map), in addition to other media figures from television and movies (participant 17’s map makes reference to the television show Jersey Shore and includes a quote from the quintessential southern debutante
Blanche DuBois from the play A Streetcar Named Desire: “I have always relied on the kindness of strangers”). Below are some examples from follow-up interviews.

47: I felt like people from New York would have almost like an Italian-inspired accent, just because that's what pops in my head from movies and TV shows.
INTERVIEWER: Any movies and TV shows in particular?
47: Like Sopranos? That kind of thing.

INTERVIEWER: Have any of you been to Birmingham at all? No, none of you? So what were you drawing on for Birmingham speakers?
26: The movie "Sweet Home Alabama" {laughter}
27: Pretty much just media.
INTERVIEWER: Media?
27: Things like that.

Some of the media references that came up in the map tasks and follow-up interviews can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Media representations of Birmingham, Columbus, and New York

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Representations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Birmingham, Alabama</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Columbus, Ohio</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New York, New York</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that the only media representation of Columbus mentioned by participants was “newscaster speak.” The media results from Table 2 mirror word cloud results, which showed a high level of consensus about stereotypical features relating to
Birmingham and New York, with little agreement about Columbus. That is, participants’ mental representations of Birmingham and New York appear to feature stereotypes more prominently than for Columbus—whether due to sheer availability of stereotypes (from media or otherwise), or to the fact that every participant has had personal experiences in Columbus, thereby rendering media representations a less useful tool in building sociolinguistic awareness.

4. Summary & Discussion
Results from the listening task indicate that participants’ ratings of social factors such as status, solidarity, and city-country associations depend heavily on the interaction between perceived accentedness and where a speaker is believed to be from. Data from the free-listing task, perceptual dialectology map task, and follow-up interviews point to strong associations of accentedness with Birmingham and New York City. In contrast, Columbus was rarely marked in the map task as a place in the United States possessing a regional accent, and was further described as specifically not accented in questionnaire responses. Moreover, in the free-listing task there was high agreement on a few descriptors for Birmingham and New York City, while descriptors for Columbus were significantly more varied, without much consensus. This patterning likely reflects fewer clear social stereotypes tied to Columbus, in addition to the differing personal experiences that each participant had with Columbus.

Taken all together, these results suggest that participants made use of a mental schema linking speech patterns to place. The question arises: how is this sociolinguistic awareness developed? What are the building blocks of such a schema, relating language, place, and social judgments? Responses to the free-listing and map tasks, and from follow-up interviews, suggest two main provenances. The first is personal experience. Taking for example the word cloud results for all three places: while the word clouds for Birmingham and New York included repeated tokens of stereotyped features, Columbus free-listing terms featured much greater diversity, with a number of singleton tokens. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the fact
that all participants in the study were Ohio State undergraduates, many words to describe university life were featured, such as college, Ohio State, sports, football, students, buckeyes, young, party, school, and university. Words relating to the city-country continuum came up too, with suburb/suburban written down by several participants, as well as more traditionally Midwestern “small town” descriptive words like family-oriented, down-to-earth, hardworking, blue collar, small, conservative, and boring. In contrast, a number of more cosmopolitan descriptors like busy, street-smart, social, opinionated, hipster, museums, art, and globally aware were featured on Columbus free lists. These (sometimes conflicting) constellations of terms may relate to participants’ differing experiences with Columbus, as one participant mentioned when the experimenter pointed out that all three participants present wrote down fairly similar terms for New York and Birmingham, but differed drastically in their free-listing of Columbus terms.

33: I think it’s just maybe because we’re living in Columbus so we might have a different perspective but I feel like mine definitely—I mean I feel like we all picked up on different things but I think they’re all accurate representations. I think it just depends on like if you were born here, or if you lived other places.

Indeed, because all of the participants had personal experience with Columbus, being current residents of the town, they drew on their Columbus-specific experience to explain the stimuli they encountered. For example, many participants expressed an expectation that within Ohio, accented speakers populate rural or “country” areas, or at the very least the outskirts of the city, which are the realm of accents. Illustrating this point, the following passages present one participant explaining that he assumed speakers he perceived as accented were not from the city, and another framing such a belief as practically universal.

11: I guess I was trying to go more by personal experience than anything else, just from people that I know, um, where they’ve come from, um, for example I’m from Dayton but I don’t really speak like my friends who are from Bellbrook [a town 10 miles south of Dayton’s city center], which is kind of
the...country area. They sound more um, more like they’re from maybe Kentucky or Tennessee. So if I heard any trace of an accent like that I generally said that they were accented and probably not from the city. Whereas if they talked sort of in a typical Midwestern with you know very plain speech, nothing’s really stressed, I was more likely to say they were from the city.

12: We all make the judgment that people who have an accent are from the country.

The existence of an accented “country” Ohioan as an available referent for many participants may help to explain correlations between the factors of city-unaccented and country-accented in the listening task for speakers said to be from Columbus.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, {to 27} so [in the free-listing task] you actually wrote “city” for Columbus (to 26) and you wrote neither “city” nor “country” for Columbus, so where does Columbus fall in this whole city-country thing?
26: Columbus. I would say city. Um, country would be like a little bit further out if you like drive North on [I-]71 or something.
27: Yeah.
26: And you hit just straight flat land, and you just see cows and stuff, that would be country, but if you’re talking just about Columbus, there’s like a lot of like buildings so I would say that is a city.
INTERVIEWER: Did you, when you were doing the listening task, did Columbus people—were you rating them more city or more country do you remember?
27: I think it was a toss-up for me, they went both ways.

12: I think part of the thing that swayed my um like the way I rated people was my, um, cousins live sort of close to—they live sort of like, they live in southeast Ohio and so they sort of have accents and like, just talk, like, funny to me.

15: yeah I have a lot of friends that’re from like Southern Ohio and they’re like—they have some families that are like fairly uneducated and people from there are just like...not to be like stereotypical, but from some like farm area and they’re a little more, um, like, just like their families in history are just a little bit less educated, so I feel like Columbus, like as a metropolitan area in general is a bit more...educated.

This sort of commentary, taken in combination with listening task results, suggests that to be accented from Columbus—or Central Ohio more broadly—is to be
country (and possibly less educated, which would follow the patterning of lower status ratings for “country,” accented Colombusites in the listening task). Indeed, “country talk” has been enregistered in other communities (Hall-Lew and Stephens 2011) and there is evidence that within Ohio, country associations are linked equally to southern areas of the state, particularly Appalachia, and any rural areas, including those in the North (Campbell-Kibler 2012). Thus “country” is both a place and a way of speaking/being. The conflation of place and accent (and even socioeconomic status) can be seen in one participant’s explanation of the “Grovetucky effect,” referring to a South Columbus suburb called Grove City which he identifies as “Appalachian.”

10: Outside [of Columbus] is more of the Grovetucky effect that I was talking about, which in most people’s minds it’s very quickly an Appalachian sort of sound. Or um a socioeconomical level. Um like I said I haven’t spent much time there, I drove through it once and I thought it was nice, but I was told not to go back, by people from this area [Central Columbus].

In providing these sorts of explanations, participants in the listening task were able to discredit accented speakers’ claims to Columbus as a place, or at least marginalize them by placing them in liminal spaces outside of city limits, while continuing to treat place as a deterministic factor for accents.

The second main source of sociolinguistic awareness uncovered in this study is media representations. This is unsurprising given past findings about how certain regional and otherwise non-mainstream dialects are represented in media (e.g. Lippi-Green 1997). What is interesting here is how clear the differentiation in representation was between the three places—with stronger weighting of media representations for the New York and Birmingham dialects that also came up in the tasks as more “salient” or nonstandard than Columbus. In the perceptual dialectology maps as well as during follow-up interviews, multiple and varied media representations came up for New York and Birmingham, including specific mafia (The Godfather, The Sopranos) and police officer (Law & Order, NYPD Blue) personae for New York and Southern belle (Gone With the Wind, A Streetcar Named Desire)
and redneck (Jeff Foxworthy, *Sweet Home Alabama*) personae for Birmingham. In contrast, the only representation of Columbus dialects came from reference to “newscaster” speak—generally without even identifying an individual newscaster to stand in as the embodiment of that dialect.

The sociolinguistic awareness built up by personal experience and media representations clearly framed participants’ (sometimes unmet) expectations of accents from each place, as seen in the examples below:

3: I expected the Ohio to be more like non-regional like more like my accent and I expected like the—the Alabama to be really Alabama-y.

47: Just recognizing that someone’s from Birmingham and that he doesn’t have the thick accent I’d think he’d have was just bizarre to me almost.

The response to these unmet expectations, interestingly, was not generally to adjust the schema—rather to view the individual as an exception to the rule, for which other explanations must be sought. Below one participant seems to assume that unaccented New Yorkers “aren’t from there” and another participant explicitly attributes transplant status to the unaccented speakers said to be from Birmingham in the experiment.

8: The people from Birmingham I was a little surprised their accents were closer to mine than what I’m used to in the south. INTERVIEWER: So what was the effect of that? What did that make you think about them? 8: It made me question whether they’re from Birmingham or not...I think they’re transplants, I think they’re northern people.

25: Not everyone who comes from a certain area speaks a certain way. Like I’ve had people say "oh you’re from Southern Ohio, I would’ve thought you would’ve have an accent,” and I’m like, "no. Not all of us do." And just like not everybody from New Jersey has an accent, not everybody from New York has an accent. I mean it just depends on smaller than state regions. INTERVIEWER: So what, um, sorts of things does it depend on? So what do you think when you meet someone from New Jersey who doesn’t have that accent? 25: I mean it’s probably a matter of like how long they’ve lived in the area.
32: I just think of New York maybe as a place where a lot of people who aren't from there live there you know what I mean? So you do get you do get a little bit of that like the standard stereotypical New York accent but you also get a lot of neutral, you get some southern, you get foreign.

Taken in combination with descriptions of “country” Columbuses as the residents of marginal areas outside city limits, explanations that appeal to a different hometown as the source of unexpected accentedness continued the trend of framing the relationship between place and accent as deterministic. Treating place as a determining factor in whether one will be accented also speaks to the issue of perceived speaker control, in that participants ascribed very little control over linguistic variables to speakers from places where accentedness is expected. Indeed, this helps to explain listening task results in which accented speakers from Birmingham or New York were not downrated, and those who were unaccented from those places were simply portrayed as not being “from there.” In contrast, speakers said to be from an “unaccented” place like Columbus who were perceived as accented were downrated in the listening task, and in some cases explained away as being “country” Columbuses from the outer edges of the city.

5. Conclusions
This study has made use of a variety of methods to better understand the role of regional accents and place associations in individuals’ sociolinguistic awareness. Patterning in listening task results demonstrated that participants altered their social judgments about speakers depending on perceived accentedness. For example, when presented with an accented speaker from Birmingham, listeners reacted differently in terms of their social evaluations than when they encountered a Columbusesite perceived to be accented. Findings from a free-listing task, perceptual dialectology map task, and follow-up interviews suggested that these participants made use of place-linked sociolinguistic expectations when presented with novel linguistic input and place information about the speaker. Some of the strategies
participants appealed to included their personal experiences as well as media representations of people from the places of interest. Follow-up interviews furthermore indicated that some participants viewed the place-accent link as almost deterministic, developing detailed explanations for why their accentedness expectations were not always met, rather than adjusting their mental schema.

The results of these four tasks have several implications for our understanding of the ways listeners use their sociolinguistic awareness, and their perceptions of speaker control over linguistic variables, when presented with novel linguistic input. To begin with, I have argued in this paper that the awareness of a link between regional accents and certain places created sociolinguistic expectations that affected participants’ evaluations of the speakers in the listening task. When expectations about the accentedness of speakers from a given place went unmet, participants’ reactions to the stimuli reflected this mismatch, in very specific and systematic ways. For speakers from a place where accentedness was expected, neither accented nor unaccented speakers were downrated. In contrast, speakers perceived as accented who were from a place where accentedness was not expected were downrated. These results suggest participants were making active use of their sociolinguistic awareness during the listening task. Follow-up interviews revealed that participants frequently explained away mismatches between place and accentedness, in effect treating place as a deterministic factor in whether a given person is accented. Examining listening task results through this frame, it appears that participants used this perception about speaker control by making allowances for speakers that are expected to be accented (and thus have less control over linguistic variables) but downrating accented speakers from a place where accentedness is unexpected. That is, participants used both their sociolinguistic awareness, and their perceptions about speaker control over linguistic variables, in socially evaluating speakers.
References


Carmichael, Katie. Submitted. “Since when does the Midwest have an accent?”: The role of regional accent and preconceived notions of place in speaker evaluations.


Preston, Dennis. 1996. Where the worst English is spoken. In Edgar Schneider (ed.), *Focus on the USA*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 297-360.


