AMERICAN REGIONAL LEXICAL SURVEY: GENDER AND AGE IN LEXICAL CHANGE IN THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES

Carol Little

Abstract

The American South has always been a distinct linguistic region. Using data from the American Regional Lexical Survey, this study shows the overall decline in use of Southern lexical terms. The following explores these changes in lexical choice in this region by comparing gender over time. Women’s choice to use Southern lexical items decreases whereas men’s usage of Southern lexical items increases significantly in the youngest generation. The results from this survey depict the effects of changing population demographics and labour statistics on choice of lexical item.

Key words
dialectology, sociolinguistics, lexical choice, regional terms, lexical survey

1 Introduction

The South has always been represented and thought of as a separate region from the rest of the United States. Some even consider it the most distinctive region in the States (Frank 1999, as quoted in Jansson 2003). The South has been portrayed as “racist, violent, poor, intolerant, and xenophobic” (Jansson 2003: 350). The roots of such a portrayal lie in the history of the American South. Though recent positive attitudes towards the South are on the rise, the South has not been able to completely shed this negative image (Jansson 2003). All references to the South hereinafter refer to the southeastern and south-central region of the United States.

Linguistically this history and portrayal of the South has several impacts. Firstly, Southern speech is stigmatized. Preston (2010) shows that Michiganders have strong negative attitudes to the correctness and pleasantness of Southern speech. In a perceptual dialectology survey where he asked Michiganders to rate the most correct English of the United States, participants always rated the South (and the New York City region) the lowest. Secondly, Southerners, aware of this stigma are linguistically insecure. Southerners also rated their own speech for correctness. The Southerners, unlike their Northern counterparts, rate their own speech relatively low for correctness but high for pleasantness. Preston (2010: