

Sarah Braun

Perceptual Dialectology in Central Wisconsin

'You Must Be from Wisconsin Because
of Your Accent and Because You Know
How to Drink'

MOREMEDIA



J. B. METZLER

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Essen, Germany

Von Sarah Braun als Dissertation zum Erwerb des Doktorgrades bei der Fakultät für Geisteswissenschaften der Universität Duisburg-Essen eingereicht unter dem Titel 'You Must Be from Wisconsin Because of Your Accent and Because You Know How to Drink': Perceptual Dialectology and Sociolinguistic Variation in Central Wisconsin.

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This book is dedicated to all familiar, but also through this project newly acquainted Wisconsinites whose generous help assisted me greatly in realizing this project. Whether you helped me connecting with fellow 'cheeseheads', took the time to share your stories with me, or provided your invaluable advice throughout the writing process; without 'youse guys', this project would not have been possible. Thank you and 'on, Wisconsin'!

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Abstract

Sociolinguistics seeks to describe language use as a social phenomenon. As such it studies both, correlations between language use and social structure as well as the social meaning inherent in these correlations. Much of sociolinguistic research has so far focused on urban areas and is increasingly engaging with rural regions. However, the dynamics of language variation in places that are neither particularly urban nor entirely rural has so far been ignored for the most part. In addition, relatively little is known about Wisconsin English to date. This book addresses gaps in existing research by investigating language discourse and variation in Marathon County, Wisconsin. The county houses a population of about 135,000 and is thus a place that is neither urban nor rural in comparison with other areas in Wisconsin. Several different methods are employed to capture the complex interplay of laypeople's language discourse and language variation, including ethnographic observations, sociolinguistic interviews, and methods used in perceptual dialectology. The combination of these methods allows the meaning of language variation in Marathon County to be studied on different levels, i.e. how speakers position themselves both overtly through discourse and, more subtly, through their linguistic practices. It is shown throughout this book that each of these approaches provide valuable results on their own, but also inform each other.

Results illustrate that respondents predominantly use a rural-urban divide to structure the sociocultural and linguistic characteristics of their surroundings, which they do on different levels in a fractally recursive manner. The fact that respondents structure both, sociocultural and linguistic aspects using the same methods suggests that these two are conflated for non-linguists. Furthermore, older interviewees are shown to be more likely to view English as spoken in Wisconsin to be an unmarked standard variety. In comparison, younger respondents are more inclined to think of Wisconsin English as a marked variety that

exhibits salient non-standard linguistic features. Most of the reported characteristics are lexical and phonetic features, which appear to be the most salient levels of language for non-linguists.

The three most commonly named phonetic features are made the object of study throughout the phonetic analysis: TRAP raising, GOAT monophthongization, and MOUTH raising. Results of the phonetic analysis provide new evidence that speakers' agency is more crucial for explaining language variation than their passive membership in traditional macrosocial categories. Speakers are actively using linguistic resources to construct their identity, which may be informed, but not necessarily determined, by macrosocial categories. A rural-urban distinction reappears once again throughout the phonetic analysis. While younger speakers, who are typically on the forefront of language change, are shown to partake in the supra-regional change TRAP retraction, farmers resist this change by using more raised and fronted variants of TRAP. This observed resistance to change may reflect their local orientation and identification with the traditional local small dairy farming practice in the face of Wisconsin's changing economy. GOAT and MOUTH are shown to vary in Marathon County according to how outdoorsy speakers are. Since the county is neither extremely urban nor rural, residents have a choice whether to orient to the urban, rural, or both aspects of the area. Outdoorsy speakers, i.e. those who orient to the region's rural features, are demonstrated to monophthongize GOAT and raise MOUTH more than those who are more oriented toward the area's urban aspects. Differences in MOUTH raising between the different "degrees of outdoorsyness" groups are particularly relevant for the youngest age group. This suggests that "degree of outdoorsyness" is starting to become a socially relevant category in Marathon County and may be replacing the traditional local social distinction between farmers versus non-farmers as Wisconsin's economy is transitioning away from small family dairy farming.

Taken together, the results show that Wisconsin English is becoming increasingly enregistered, a finding which none of the individual approaches to studying language discourse and variation in Marathon County reveals on their own. The review of a few souvenirs which show the commodification of Wisconsin English and the analysis of one Wisconsin comedian's performances reveals that a link between place, identity, and language use is being established. This finding provides further evidence that Wisconsin English is becoming increasingly enregistered, which appears to be especially true for the younger generation. The performance of the Wisconsin comedian shows that a "Nortwoods persona" is beginning to evolve. Although it is not clear yet whether this persona is specific to Wisconsin or encompasses the (Upper) Midwest more generally, the present study illustrates that dialect features are being mapped not only onto place, but simultaneously connected with a certain identity.

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Introduction and Background

1

Sociolinguistics seeks to describe language use as a social phenomenon. As such it studies both, correlations between language use and social structure as well as the social meaning inherent in these correlations. While much of sociolinguistic research in the United States (henceforth US) has focused on investigating language variation in urban places (e.g. Labov 1966; Eckert 1989) and more recently also increasingly in rural locations (e.g. Reed 2014; Geenberg 2014; Podesva et al. 2015), linguists have largely overlooked language variation in places that are at neither extreme of this spectrum. In addition, publications on Wisconsin English are relatively recent and it has been claimed to be an understudied phenomenon (Remlinger, Salmons & von Schneidemesser 2009: 177; Schuld et al. 2016: 16). This book addresses these research gaps by investigating language discourse as well as variation in Marathon County, Wisconsin, a place that is neither particularly urban nor rural.

Furthermore, recent sociolinguistic research that has been referred to under the umbrella term *third wave of variation studies* (Eckert 2012: 93) has stressed that community language variation is much more complex than what earlier first-wave studies assumed, that is, simply a reflection of macrosocial categories. While Labovian first-wave studies have provided valuable insights into general principles of language variation and change, third-wave studies have demonstrated that these broad correlations overlook essential community-specific information (Fridland 2010: 393). Rather, it has been claimed that the meaning of language variation is much more complex and that linguistic practices are different in each community. In order to examine this complex meaning in Marathon County, the present book employs several different approaches to studying language variation beyond the traditional sociolinguistic descriptive account. These approaches include not only what speakers believe about local culture and language use and

how these two are intertwined, but also how these beliefs compare with actual language production. To reach this goal, the following methods are employed: ethnographic observation, sociolinguistic interviews, and methods used in perceptual dialectology. In addition, this book seeks to demonstrate how these approaches to studying sociolinguistic variation provide valuable information on their own, but also inform each other, thus “making the picture of local variation and the motivations behind it emerge much more clearly” (ibid: 395). For example, following Geenberg (2014), ethnographic observations paired with discourse data are used to explore the perceived recursive urban-rural contrast in Wisconsin, which in turn will be shown to have repercussions for language variation in Marathon County. Moreover, locals’ language discourse is analyzed, the results of which are used to guide the phonetic analysis, showing that “examining the patterns identified by nonlinguists [...] fruitfully guide research into the actual patterns of variation in speech” (Evans 2013b: 269). Finally, all of the results taken together reveal that Wisconsin English is becoming increasingly enregistered, a finding which none of the individual approaches reveals on its own.

The remainder of this introductory chapter is structured as follows: the subsequent section introduces perceptual dialectology, which is one of the frameworks used for data collection and analysis of this project. This framework is described here because it is one of the major approaches used to study language variation in Marathon County but also because it is a fairly recent approach used in sociolinguistics to studying laypeople’s language discourse. First, a brief overview of the field as such is provided, which is followed by relevant previous research findings within perceptual dialectology. Following this section, Wisconsin English is introduced in order to provide an overview of what previous linguistic research in this region has focused on. Finally, the last section of this chapter lays out the book’s remaining structure.

1.1 Perceptual Dialectology

This section introduces perceptual dialectology. However, the aim here is not to recount everything that has previously been done within this field of study, but only to cover those theoretical underpinnings, methods, as well as previous research findings relevant to the present topic. The goal is thus not to summarize every single perceptual dialectology study ever conducted but to report on a few which are relevant in the given context as well as to point to general trends across several studies. The selection of studies is limited to those carried out in the US, particularly those with findings relating to the present geographical area of interest within the US, i.e. the Midwest and particularly Wisconsin.

1.1.1 Definition

Perceptual dialectology¹ studies non-linguists' overt beliefs and attitudes about language variation (Preston 1989: 2). It is assumed that upon hearing certain linguistic features, a set of beliefs and attitudes is triggered; however, not actually toward the feature itself but rather toward its users (Niedzielski & Preston 2000: 9). There is an essential difference between the real world and any given person's perception as the latter presumably works much as a filter does through which we experience our environment: "people react to a *perceived* environment; their behavior frequently appears to reflect the images they form of the social and physical environment around them, rather than the 'true' environment" (Gould 1977: 111). This means that we do not react to plain sensory input that we receive from our environment but that we react to what we perceive this input to mean. Thus, perception is the only filter through which we experience our surroundings and is individually influenced by our unique set of experiences, some of which we share with the social groups that we associate with while others are uniquely ours (Edwards 2006: 324; Gould & White 1986: 28).

Now, perceptual dialectology, as the name suggests, takes the same approach in viewing the processing of speech not just as a mere decoding of information but as a complex and selective process which is influenced by each individual's demographics, ideology, and past interactions. In short, Preston puts it as follows: "the brain gets in the way of your ear" (Niedzielski 2017: 381). No first-hand experience with groups that are to be evaluated is necessary as we "do not 'discover' social knowledge through our experience of people and events in the social world, but we construct it collectively in a culture, and this is communicated and negotiated between the members of the cultural group" (Hinton 2000: 156). Not only the perception process is influenced and negotiated collectively, but this also has repercussions for language production since the content of what and how we

¹Dennis R. Preston, founder of modern perceptual dialectology, prefers the term *folk dialectology* over *perceptual dialectology* because it immediately clarifies its affiliation with *folk linguistics*. However, the common misconception of the meaning of *folk* as 'false' has hindered this designation (Preston 1999: xxxix). *Language regard* has also been used in recent years to refer to this field of study as it stresses that some beliefs about language are not necessarily evaluative (ibid. 2010: 100). Yet, following Preston, the term *perceptual dialectology* is used throughout this book to describe this field of study. However, the term *perception* by itself refers to cognitive processes (Goldstein & Brockmole 2017: 10), which this field is not primarily concerned with. Rather, the term *perception* in this field of research is used to refer to both, laypeople's plain ability to recognize and detect language variation as well as their ideas about this variation (Preston 2018: 199). This term will be used with the same meanings throughout this book.

communicate is a matter of (sometimes unconscious) choice: “We choose our words according to how we perceive them or how we believe that others will perceive them” (Kretzschmar 1999: xvii).

In order to get an idea of how perceptual dialectology fits into linguistics, its position in relation to the general study of language is outlined in Figure 1.1. While *a*, located in the top of the triangle of Figure 1.1, describes linguistic interest in what people say, so language production studies, *a'* above concerns itself with the cognitive aspects which govern the former (Niedzielski & Preston 2009: 146ff.). Both deal with language performance and are thus speaker-centric approaches to studying language variation. In comparison, the bottom of the figure shows the various listener-centric approaches to studying language variation (Purnell 2010: 290). These constitute reactions to language ranging on a continuum from conscious to unconscious. The left side of the triangle’s bottom line (b_1) describes the field of perceptual dialectology, i.e. the conscious beliefs and attitudes toward language whereas the right side (b_0) belongs to the language attitude tradition carried out within the field of social psychology of language, which are the automatic and unconscious reactions to language. The boundary between these two research traditions is fuzzy; however, it has been suggested that it is worth maintaining as implicit and explicit attitudes have been found to diverge at times. The present book exclusively addresses b_1 , so non-linguists’ overt comments on language use. Lastly, *b'* describes those cognitive processes which underlie non-linguists’ beliefs and attitudes about language (Niedzielski & Preston 2009: 146ff.).

There have been many different concerns studied within perceptual dialectology, some of which are detailed further on in this chapter. Questions asked in this field of research include what it is that laypeople have to say about language variation, where they believe it exists and comes from, as well as which functions non-linguists think language variation fulfills (Preston 1999: xxv). Another concern in perceptual dialectology has been which level of language it is that is most salient to laypeople. It has been claimed that phonological features are most noticeable to non-linguists but that there are of course multiple factors playing into perception. These include other linguistic ones such as intonation, vocal quality, as well as speech rate but also non-linguistic aspects such as sociohistorical ones (ibid: xxix). Non-linguistic causes of perception may be explanatory for any perceptions which do not correspond with isoglosses: historical, political, and social events or other stereotypes may function as a divider between two groups, which in turn may result in the assumption that there is an isogloss dividing these two groups where there actually does not exist any (Preston 1993b: 116).

The study of laypeople’s perception about language variation began in the 19th century, but it was not until the mid-20th century that the field was established by

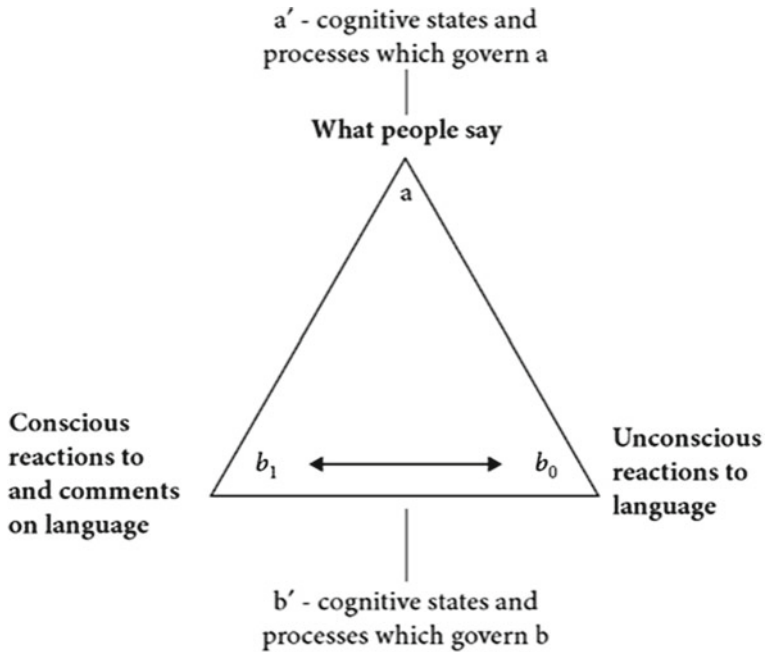


Figure 1.1 The position of perceptual dialectology and language attitudes in the general study of language. (Niedzielski & Preston 2009: 147; reproduced with permission of © Benjamins [2009]. All Rights Reserved)

Dutch and Japanese researchers (Preston 2018: 177). However, as “the research on dialect divisions [...] based on the dialect consciousness of the masses, was born in the Netherlands, raised in Japan, reached adulthood in the United States” (Long 1999: 178), and the present study follows the US approach, the following description of methods used within perceptual dialectology focuses exclusively on the latter approach.

More recent approaches within the realm of perceptual dialectology were made by Dennis R. Preston within the US beginning in the 1980s (e.g. Preston 1986). His interest in laypeople’s perceptions of language variation “has established it as a research technique often accompanying general studies of variation or carried out independently for its own ethnographic value” (Preston 2018: 177). Preston has employed several methods for investigating language perception (Preston

1993a: 334), which ask respondents to comment on or discuss concerns related to language to “expose not merely their traditional, prepackaged notions but also the processes that govern their thinking” (Niedzielski & Preston 2009: 146). These include different dialect ranking (e.g. along correctness, pleasantness, and degree of difference scales) and dialect identification tasks, but also qualitative interviews and the famous draw-a-map task, the latter of which will be discussed in the following (e.g. Preston 1993a: 335, 345, 356, 359, 367).

The most often replicated method introduced in Preston (1982) is the draw-a-map task, which was borrowed from cultural geography (Preston 2018: 185). The task asks respondents to indicate on a blank map where they believe regional speech zones to exist. In a second step respondents are then asked to label each circled area with either names of the variety spoken, specific linguistic features, and / or (nick)names of the people who live there (Preston 1993a: 335). The aim of this task is to access the respondents’ mental images of language variation as well as to uncover language attitudes, which disclose stereotypes about the culture and the speakers of the identified dialect. The task’s name is somewhat misleading as the respondents do not actually draw a map but annotate a map that is provided for them (Evans 2011: 409). Nevertheless, the terminology is used throughout this book to be consistent with previous research in this area. Preston (1993b: 116) suggests avoiding the use of the word *dialect* for the instructions of the draw-a-map task as this word implies to non-linguists that they are being asked about nonstandard speech. This method provides the researcher with two types of data: first, the respondent provides spatial associations by drawing lines while second the respondent also indicates qualitative labels to name each drawn region. Thus, it answers two research questions: where do nonlinguists perceive variation and what do they associate with these differences (Evans 2013b: 276)?

The idea of spatial perception, referring in the present context to that of large geographic areas, is a fairly recent application to linguistic issues as its foundation is situated in the field of cultural geography. In this area, geographers study how laypeople develop notions of other places (Gould & White 1986: 3). They do this by investigating “the way that the perceived differences between various parts of the earth’s surface affect movements of many different kinds” (ibid.). In a final step they compare these mental maps with the characteristics of the real world (ibid.). Mental mapping in linguistics works analogous: the goal is to find out about laypeople’s perception of language variation and to see then if these match reality and if (or how) these perceptions influence language change.

One issue with the draw-a-map task lies in the question of how much detail the map should contain (Preston 1993a: 335). A blank map is the unbiased choice compared with a map that contains the names of towns (Lameli, Purschke &

Kehrein 2008: 81) but choosing a blank map poses different challenges: if the respondents do not have sufficient geographical knowledge to complete the task, results may be inaccurate after all (Preston 1993a: 335). Thus, knowledge of geography will influence the participants' performance (Lance 1999: 283). This means that results from this task, but also from other methods used in perceptual dialectology, are always going to be confounded with folk geography (Preston 1993a: 335).

In order to find out about the collective perception of a group of people, composite maps of respondents' drawn boundaries have to be produced (Preston 2002: 69ff.). Due to the lack of adequate technology at the time, Preston's earlier studies had to be analyzed manually, which only permitted the overlay of a few maps. This, in turn, resulted in low sociolinguistic depth in the analysis since it was impossible to investigate results in dependence on demographic factors such as gender, age, or ethnicity (Preston 1993a: 338). Later studies utilized a digitizing pad in order to convert the drawn boundaries into coordinates that were then inserted into a computer program which displayed these coordinates against a background of a standard map, allowing the "automatic compilation of composite maps based on large numbers of respondents" (*ibid.*). More recently, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software has been used to analyze hand-drawn maps (e.g. Montgomery & Stoeckle 2013). This has made the compilation of numerous maps possible, which in turn has made more sophisticated analyses of hand-drawn maps feasible (Preston 2018: 188). These composite maps and their attribute tables, which can contain any information about the respondents, areas, as well as provided labels (*ibid.*: 186), allow the comparison of perceptions across different groups, production-based dialect maps, and any other type of maps (Preston 1993a: 341). Thus, the application of GIS software to the draw-a-map task and hence to the study of dialect perceptions "allows for full-color, quantitatively precise representations of the hand-drawn data as well as maps that contrast social subgroups of respondents" (Preston 2018: 186). These new composite aggregate maps, also called heatmaps, display each respondents' drawn areas on one map, showing the greatest overlap but also areas drawn by individuals. The last step is to analyze the respondents' provided labels in order to see which dialect variation they actually perceive (Preston 1993a: 344). Optionally, a comparison of perceived and production-based isoglosses or other non-linguistic factors and / or the type of perceived features, e.g. phonological or lexical ones, may be investigated to see which linguistic level is most salient to laypeople as the last step of the analysis (Preston 1999: xxix; Preston 2002: 69ff.).

In addition to quantitative methods such as the draw-a-map task described above, qualitative interviews "concerning nonlinguists' general views of language

diversity” (Preston 1993a: 367) are important for the study of perceptual dialectology as discourse is a vital way for non-linguists to discuss language perceptions as well as attitudes (*ibid.*; Preston 2018: 194). The topics of Preston’s interviews have usually been the tasks that the respondents had carried out previously (Preston 1999: xxxiv).

1.1.2 Previous Research

This section does not aim to provide a summary of every single study in its entirety but rather focuses on those aspects of each study that are relevant for the present topic, i.e. findings relating to the Midwest and those concerned with Wisconsin.

In one of Preston’s perceptual dialectology studies, respondents were asked to rank the speech of all US states along a ten-point correctness and pleasantness scale (Preston 1993a: 345). The results of two groups of respondents, Michiganders and Indianans, revealed that both agreed that the least correct as well as least pleasant English is spoken in the New York City / New Jersey region and throughout the US South (*ibid.*; Preston 2018: 192). As the two groups of respondents agree in this assessment, one has to wonder whether these regions are most salient due to being linguistically different or due to stereotypes of nonlinguistic nature believed about these regions and its people, and thus also about their language (*ibid.*). The Michigan raters voted their own state the highest along the correctness scale, but neighboring states such as Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania received comparatively high ratings on the correctness scale (Preston 1993a: 347; Preston 1999: xxxiv). Preston also conducted a range of interviews which provide further insights into laypeople’s overt linguistic notions (Preston 1993a: 375). For example, the qualitative analysis of interviews with Michigan participants revealed that nonlinguists see a major division in American English between the South and the North, the latter of which tends to be perceived as the “land of correctness” (*ibid.*: 369).

In a pursuit to explore the relationship between Midwestern laypeople’s perception of their own dialect and its relation to Standard American English (SAE), Niedzielski (2002) conducted interviews with 30 European-American Detroiters, asking them whether they think Michiganders have a distinct dialect, if Michiganders sound different from network news anchors, and where one would have to go in order to encounter SAE (Niedzielski 2002: 322f.). 27 respondents asserted without hesitation that one would be most likely to hear SAE in Michigan and

that European-American Detroiters do not have an accent². In relation to these answers, some informants talked about being puzzled when they traveled out of state and were called out for having an accent. Respondents tended to relate these “accusations” to themselves having an accent, but that (white) Detroiters in general do not have one. This implies that even though Detroiters may be aware of certain non-standard features in their speech, they do not relate these features to other speakers of the same variety. This perception is in stark contrast with what linguists found at the time as the variety spoken by European-American Detroiters was participating in the Northern Cities Shift (NCS) and was thus “rapidly diverging from what most Americans feel is ‘standard’” (ibid: 323). An acoustic analysis of the interviews showed that the respondents were using advanced features of the NCS and were thus judged to not be speaking SAE (ibid: 324). Niedzielski explains this incongruity between perception and production as follows: “a person’s self-identity (in this case, one of ‘SAE speaker’) may remain fixed, even if ‘reality’ (in this case, acoustic facts) mutates” (ibid: 327). She further argued that European-American Detroiters confirm and keep their identity as SAE speakers through their social interactions (ibid.).

In Fought’s study (2002: 114), 112 undergraduate students from California were asked to complete the draw-a-map task of the entire US. The respondents tended to label California, the Northwest, the South, the Midwest, and the East (Fought 2002: 118). The areas labelled as ‘Midwest’ were quite variable; however, in the composite view, Iowa tended to be the center of the Midwest for many informants with the bordering states Kansas, Iowa, and Wisconsin making up a Midwestern block. However, different regions, e.g. the southwest or the south, were also identified in a midwestern region by some participants (ibid: 119). Since the informants labelled so many different states as *Midwestern*, there appears to be a “geographic ambiguity of this region for Californians” (ibid: 120). In contrast, the informants appeared to be in agreement as to which states belong to the South. Besides geographic labels, informants also provided comments relating to standard or non-standard language use (ibid: 124). The geographical regions associated with “proper English” are primarily the New England states and its neighboring states, followed by the eastern states of the Midwest, i.e. Michigan

²Unfortunately, Niedzielski does not mention whether questions about race were included in her interviews, so it does not become apparent how Niedzielski arrived at the finding that a dominant language ideology finds only European-American Detroiters to be ‘accent-free’. However, this finding does provide evidence that language and race are co-constructed: ideas about racialized groups and ideas about language use are formed together. In this study, standard language use and whiteness appear to be going hand in hand for the respondents (also cf. Section 5.2.4.2).

and Ohio, as well as the upper South (ibid: 125). Evaluative labels associated with the Midwest included some negative commentary, e.g. “hick”, but less so than the southern and eastern areas. In addition, there were also some neutral or positive labels associated with the Midwest, e.g. “downhome” and “laid back”. In general, respondents were in disagreement whether this region had a “heavy accent” or a “non-distinguishable accent” (ibid: 130). Other previous research has confirmed that the majority of laypeople tend to perceive the Midwest as “correct” and “accent-free”, thus the home of General American English (e.g. Lance 1999: 296; Preston 2002: 77f.; Gordon 2004a: 293f.; Gordon 2004b: 338). However, as Fought’s findings suggest, not everyone agrees with this assessment.

A study confirming this finding investigated the speech of Sarah Palin³ during the 2008 presidential election. Results showed that US-Americans tended to interpret the native Alaskan’s informal language use, e.g. the use of euphemisms, discourse markers such as *you betcha*, “g-dropping”, and final devoicing, to index Upper Midwestern speech (a geographical region of which Wisconsin is a part, cf. Section 2.1) rather than Alaskan (Purnell, Raimy & Salmons 2009: 348f.). This finding leads to two conclusions: first, whereas Midwestern speech may be enregistered as “nonaccented”, the opposite appears to be true for Upper Midwestern speech in particular. Second, (some) people appear to be able to recognize an Upper Midwestern dialect based on specific linguistic features.

Earlier perceptual dialectology studies (e.g. those reported on above), focused on macro-level perceptions of the entire US. In contrast, more recent approaches within this field of study have focused on laypeople’s language discourse on the micro-level (e.g. within individual states). This local focus has been argued to provide “a more detailed and nuanced picture of variation than might appear when using a larger scale” (Evans 2013b: 269). For instance, such research has investigated perceptions of language variation in Washington State (Evans 2011, 2013a, 2013b), Texas (Cukor-Avila et al. 2012), California (Bucholtz et al. 2007, 2008), and Ohio (Benson 2003). A few studies have investigated Wisconsinites’ perceptions of language variation within the state, which are summarized in the following.

Remlinger, Salmons & von Schneidemesser (2009) studied whether locals are aware of and hold attitudes toward Wisconsin and Michigan’s Upper Peninsula

³A native Alaskan politician who ran as the Republican Party nominee for Vice President in the 2008 election.

English by focusing on the parallel enregisterment⁴ processes of the two varieties (Remlinger, Salmons & von Schneidemesser 2009: 176). They note that an awareness of distinctive speech patterns in both locations has only recently emerged but that it is advancing. They further outline the development process of both varieties, noting that an indexical shift has taken place: features which once functioned as ethnic markers are now increasingly being recognized as regional features (ibid: 179). Finally, they conclude that locals of both locations hold positive attitudes toward their distinctive speech (ibid: 188f.).

Schuld et al. (2016) carried out a dialect identification task with Wisconsinites. They asked their research participants to recognize Wisconsin English recordings devoid of salient regional features (such as interdental fricative stopping, BAG raising, and absence of back-vowel fronting) among a selection of American English speech samples. They paradoxically found that the majority of the respondents was able to correctly identify the Wisconsin English samples yet considered these to be “normal”. Thus, in line with Remlinger, Salmons & von Schneidemesser’s (2009) findings, Schuld et al. (2016: 25ff.) conclude that a distinctive regional accent is developing and that Wisconsinites possess an awareness of their own distinctive speech.

Erica Benson (qtd. in Raimy 2013: 87f.) examined Wisconsinites’ sensitivity to the state’s internal language variation (cf. Section 1.2) by utilizing the degree-of-difference task. This task asks respondents, in her case residents of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to rate the English spoken in different areas of the state as the same or different to their own speech along a four-point scale. Benson found that the respondents rated Milwaukee’s and Rhinelander’s speech as most different. Arguably, the reasons why these two were rated as most different are that the former is the state’s only true urban area and the latter is situated in northern Wisconsin, a rather sparsely populated area (cf. Section 2.1, Figure 2.2) evoking stereotypes of “up north” and Canada.

1.2 Wisconsin English

Previous research on Wisconsin English has mostly been concerned with language production, finding internal language variation within the state (e.g. Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006: 142; Purnell, Raimy & Salmons 2013: 7ff.; Speth 2013: 58). For

⁴Enregisterment is defined as “processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms” (Agha 2003: 231; also cf. Chapter 7).

instance, Labov, Ash & Boberg (2006: 142) propose two isoglosses which divide Wisconsin into three discrete dialect areas: the southern and eastern regions of the state are argued to belong to the “Inland North” dialect, the northern area of Wisconsin is said to form part of the “North Central” dialect, while the rest of the state is associated with the “North” dialect (ibid: 148, Map 11.15). However, these findings are far from conclusive as Labov, Ash & Boberg (ibid: 3) base their findings exclusively on phonetic and phonological variation of only 29 speakers in Wisconsin’s urban areas. By focusing on urban areas alone, much of what is going on in a mostly rural state such as Wisconsin is unfortunately overlooked.

Other linguists have also observed language variation in Wisconsin. For example, southwestern Wisconsin has been described to differ from the rest of the state in terms of lexical variation (e.g. Marckwardt 1971: 82, Map 5.7; Carver 1986: 258, Map 8), which has been attributed to the unique settlement history of that area known as the lead region. Predominantly Cornish immigrants settled in that part of the state, but also in northwestern Illinois (Marckwardt 1971: 82, Map 5.7; Nesbit 1989: 116). This means that southwestern Wisconsin has cultural ties with northwestern Illinois due to the same settlement history in contrast to the rest of the state. Thus, it has been suggested that this part of the state is part of the “Midlands” dialect area, bringing the total to (at least) four dialectal regions within Wisconsin (Marckwardt 1971: 82, Map 5.7; Speth 2013: 62f.). Moreover, linguists have described some lexical items which split Wisconsin into an eastern and western region, for example the use of *soda* versus *pop* (von Schneidemesser 1996: 284; Katz 2016: 59), *drinking fountain* versus *bubbler* (Katz 2016: 76ff.), and *garage sale* versus *rummage sale* (ibid: 13). In conclusion, previous research shows that there is language variation throughout Wisconsin with (at least) four distinct dialectal regions: the southeastern, southwestern, central, and northern part of the state.

Of special interest to those linguists studying phonetic and phonological variation in Wisconsin have been two sound changes involving TRAP⁵, THOUGHT, and LOT which are intersecting within the state boundaries: the low back vowel merger and the NCS (Gordon 2004b: 342f.; Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006: 181; Bauer & Parker 2008: 426; Benson, Fox & Balkman 2011: 272, 303). Particularly pre-velar raising of TRAP (making *bag* sound like *beg*), also referred to as BAG raising, has been studied in the context of Wisconsin English (Purnell 2008; Bauer & Parker 2008; Benson, Fox & Balkman 2011), though its use has also been documented in the Pacific Northwest

⁵Here as well as throughout the rest of this book, the Wells (1982) lexical set system is used to refer to individual vowels. This system makes use of capitalized keywords to refer to vowel classes. The advantage of using this system is that it is transparent as well as consistent across English varieties, which allows for a straightforward comparison.