

“[T]he heart of the city, where the accent's the strongest”: Localizing Perceptions of the “Strong Boston Accent” in a Changing City

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Background

- Perception of the **Eastern New England dialect (ENE)** has been extensively studied inside and outside of New England [4, 5, 6, 7].
- This study investigates the perception and localization of ENE **within the Greater Boston Area (GBA)** to better understand how local urban and suburban ideologies influence linguistic practices.
- In previous work, Massachusetts residents name **South Boston** and other historically White ethnic working-class neighborhoods as places where residents use ENE features, despite also acknowledging the changing ethnic and class demographics of these neighborhoods as well as the declining use of ENE features in the region [1, 8].

Research Questions

- **What neighborhoods** (other than South Boston) do residents of Boston identify as “having an accent?”
- Do these neighborhoods fit the traditional demographic pattern, or have resident perceptions changed with changing neighborhood demographics and speech patterns?
- Do residents identify other ways of speaking around the city?

Participants

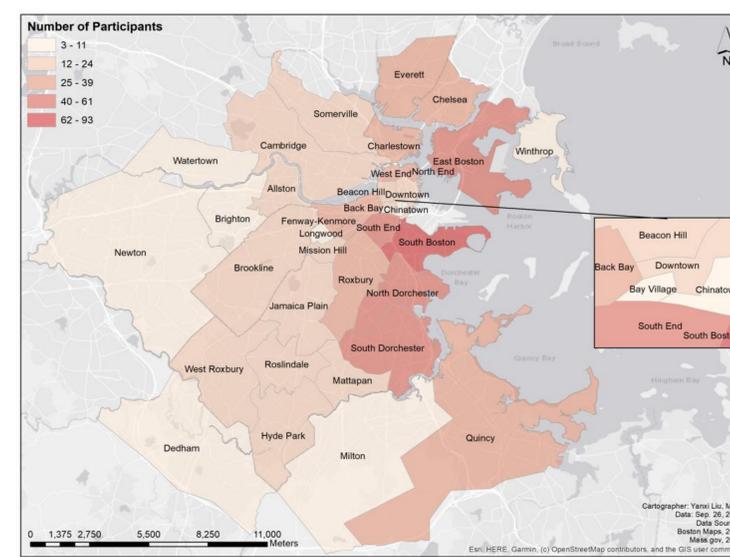
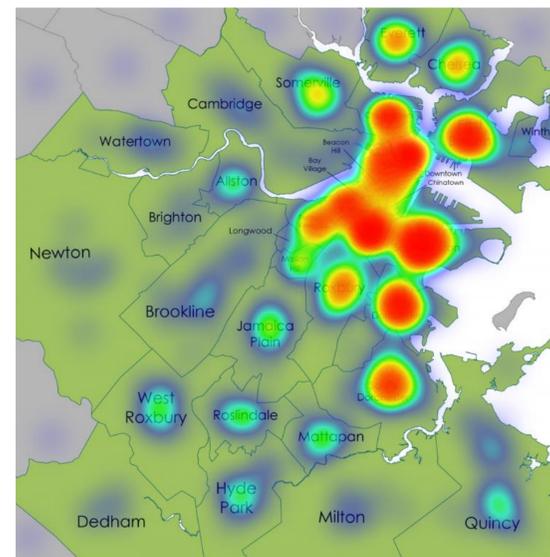
- **111 current Boston residents** who grew up in Boston (N=23), Eastern Mass/GBA (N=69), or elsewhere in Mass (N=19; e.g., Cape Cod, Western Mass, or near Providence, RI).
 - 18-76 years old
 - Female (N=54), male (N=56), and non-binary (N=1)
 - 13% AAPI, 13% Black, 1% Latinx, 6% Multiracial, 67% White

Methods

- In Qualtrics, participants identified neighborhoods on a map of the GBA where residents had a very **strong “Boston” accent** (up to 10).
- Results are displayed in traditional heat maps and choropleth maps reporting number of clicks per neighborhood.
- Differences between neighborhood rankings were tested using paired *t*-tests.
- Participants were also asked to describe the attributes of a typical person who spoke with a “Boston” accent as well as what makes a “Boston” accent.



Results



Participants associate White ethnicity (41%), middle age (33%), and working-class status (29%) with use of ENE features like non-rhoticity (77%) and START-fronting (41%)

Discussion

- **South Boston** is the perceptual geographic epicenter of strong “Boston” accents; this result is better captured by the choropleth map.
- **Other historically White ethnic, working-class enclaves** are also linked with accented speech, despite participant comments on changing neighborhoods, similar to the **Borough Accent Ideology** [2].
- Other ways of speaking are not mentioned, despite a comparatively multi-racial participant pool.

--Possible Explanations/Further Work--

- “Boston” accent prompt may have biased participants to only consider traditional speakers of ENE.
- **A dominant sense of ethnic place may intensify under perceived threat** [3]; some residents may maintain the association between ethnicity, class, and accent *because of* recent demographic changes.

References

[1] Babcock, R. D. 2014. Folk-Linguistic Attitudes in Eastern Massachusetts. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics* 4:415-428. [2] Becker, K. & Newlin-Lukowicz, L. 2018. The Myth of the NYC Borough Accent. *U of Penn Working Papers in Linguistics* 24.2:9-17. [3] Buccitelli, A.B. 2016. *City of Neighborhoods*. U of Wisconsin Press. [4] Chartier, N. & Jones, B. 2018. Six Views of New England. Poster presented at NWAV 47, NYU. [5] Fernandes, M., Routhier, M. & Ravindranath, M. 2014. Hicks, lobstah, and Massholes. *American Dialect Society Annual Meeting*, Minneapolis, MN. [6] Hartley, L.C. 2005. The Consequences of Conflicting Stereotypes. *American Speech* 80(4):388-405. [7] Preston, D. 1986. Five Visions of America. *Language in Society* 15:221-240. [8] Stanford, J.N. 2019. *New England English*. Oxford U Press.