The Texas Dialect

– A Multi-Modal Exploration of the Lone Star State's Language –

An ENGL 3360 Final Project by Garrett Haley | *May 12, 2015*

A nation of many dialects

English is the most influential language in the world (Ronen, Gonçalvesb and Hu). About a quarter of the world's population is fluent or competent in English, and that number is steadily growing (Crystal).

Among the English-speaking world are an astounding number of dialects. Even in the United States alone, at least a dozen distinct dialects exist, not to mention innumerable geographic dialect varieties (Dialects: Regional Varieties of English).

One such dialect is Texan English (also known as the Texan Accent), spoken by most Texans and—according to some sources—by Oklahomans and some New Mexicans as well (City-Data.com).
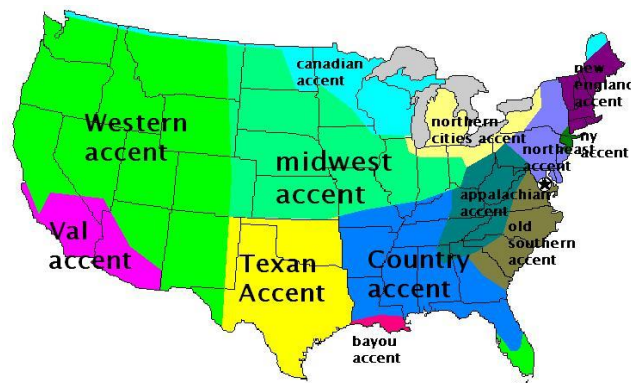

Figure 1: Major regional dialects in the United States

The map shown above suggests that over 30 million people live within the boundaries of the Texan Accent. This figure represents nearly 10% of the population of the United States.

Texan English characteristics

Linguistic experts say Texan English is quite distinct from other patterns of speech (Hinrichs). In fact, even casual observers can easily recognize the curious word pronunciations frequently found in the Texan Accent. Many websites shamelessly poke fun at Texans' articulations. For example, one website lists a complete dictionary of words that Texans typically pronounce "funny," ranging from "code" (cold) to "gunna" (going to) to "sayud" (said) (Rigsbee).

Other more serious, less satirical analyses of the Texas dialect identify "vowel mergers" as a key influencer in the language of the Lone Star State. Though these mergers (also known as *monophthongs*) are not strictly limited to Texan English, the particular combination of mergers found in Texas is unique.

"The 'vowel merger' is a blending of vowel sounds, so that words like 'win' and 'when' start to sound alike, as do 'cot' and 'caught,' 'feel' and 'fill,' and so on," University of Texas at San

Antonio linguistics experts explain (Colloff). "More and more Texans are now blurring their vowels together this way, particularly those born after 1972."

The same researchers noted other specific characteristics of the Texan twang, including:

★ slow, lazy cadence

★ vowel elongation ("bay-uhd" for bad, "kee-uhd" for kid)

★ flattened vowel sounds ("naht" for night)

Other researchers (University of Wisconsin: Wilwaukee) have compiled thorough lists of specific terms and pronunciations frequently found in Texan speech. Still others (Neuliep) (Bailey) have compiled lists of different words that Texans often pronounce identically or almost identically:

"fire" and "far"

"win" and "when"

"cot" and "caught"

"feel" and "fill"

"pool" and "pull"

"sale" and "sell"

Furthermore, Spanish influences the vernacular of Texans, especially in the state's southern regions. In addition to basic vocabulary words like *tamale* and *bronco*, many Spanish words like *bueno*, *adios*, and *sí* find their way into everyday conversations (Walters).

The Texas lexicon

However, perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the Texas dialect is the collection of words and phrases that either originated in Texas or were largely popularized in Texas. Through the years, Texans have developed a curious lexicon that includes a number of interesting words and colloquialisms, including but not limited to: "fixin to," "blue norther," "might could," and—of course— "howdy" and "y'all."

Figure 2: The State of Texas

And now, an important question: Are the aforementioned members of the Texas English lexicon used as frequently today as in years past? Or are expressions like "fixin to" and "howdy" gradually nearing extinction as Texas urbanizes and diversifies?

To answer this inquiry, we shall turn to one of the most interesting and accurate tools used to measure linguistic trends today: The Google Ngram Viewer software.

Google's powerful corpus

Nearly five years ago, Google introduced a quantitative analysis tool that offers unparalleled insights into the evolution of English. Described as "a corpus of digitized texts," the Google Ngram Viewer allows users to study the changing popularity of words and phrases in millions of historical texts.

"We report the creation of a corpus of 5,195,769 digitized books containing ~4% of all books ever published," Google-affiliated researchers reported in a 2010 *Science* article (Michel, Shen and Aiden). "Computational analysis of this corpus enables us to observe cultural trends and subject them to quantitative investigation."

The online database, which boasts a staggering 500 billion words (Charles), mostly features English books, though some other languages are included as well.

"The database of 500bn words is thousands of times bigger than any existing research tool, with a sequence of letters that is 1,000 times longer than the human genome," *The Guardian* reported (Jha). "The vast majority, around 72%, is in English."

The popularity of Texan expressions today

What does this formidable online database reveal about Texan English? Quite a lot, actually. Shown below is a list of the five most iconic Texas-isms—*might could*, *blue norther*, *fixin to*, *howdy*, and *y'all*—listed in order of popularity today (according to the Google corpus).

#1: Y'all

#2: Fixin to

#3: Howdy

#4: Might could

#5: Blue norther
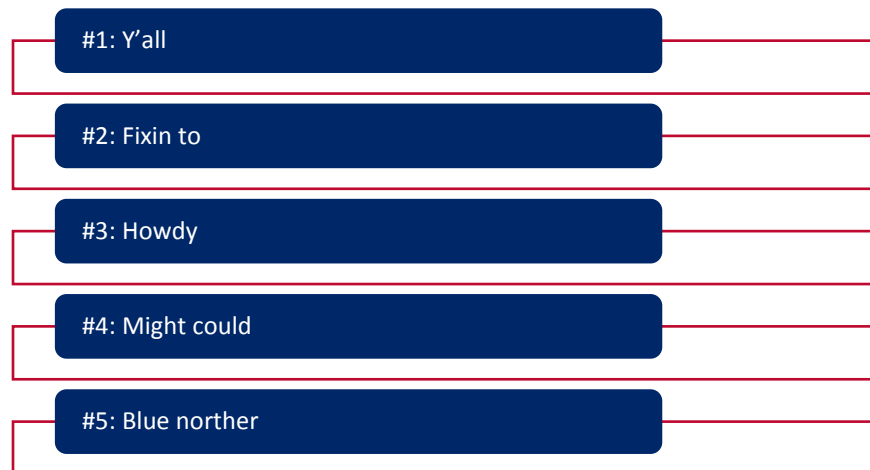
The Google database not only allows users to compare the popularity of different terms to one another; it also charts the historical usage levels of words and expressions. Plugging these five hallmarks of the Texas English dialect into the database yields the following charts. The timeframe for each chart is 1900-2008, and the left-hand axis of each chart shows the percentage of books in which the term can be found.

The historical popularity of Texan expressions

Blue norther evidently experienced a spike in usage during the 1950s, followed by a sharp decline in the 1960s-1970s. However, the term's popularity later increased notably during the 1980s and early 1990s, peaking in 1994. Since then, its usage has declined (Google).

Figure 3: Historical usage levels of "blue norther"

Might could's popularity since 1900 has fluctuated up and down, yet the overall trend is pointed upward. The phrase reached the height of its popularity in 2003 (Google).

Figure 4: Historical usage levels of "might could"

Howdy rose steadily in popularity during the early 1900s, then it dropped precipitously around the middle of the century. Since then, however, the colloquial Southern greeting has made a dramatic comeback, reaching new heights in recent years (Google).

Figure 5: Historical usage levels of "howdy"

Fixin to has experienced a tumultuous history. The Texan term reached a popularity pinnacle around 1950, then plummeted in the 1960s, before making a modest comeback just in the past 20 years. Its all-time peak so far occurred in 2004 (Google).

Figure 6: Historical usage levels of "fixin to"

Finally, the apparent winner of them all: *y'all*. According to Google, *y'all* was used sparingly in English writings during the early twentieth century, with a little flurry of activity around the Great Depression area. Then, in the latter part of the century, *y'all*'s popularity soared exponentially, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s. Though its usage has flattened out a bit in recent years, it remains on a distinct upward trajectory (Google).

Figure 7: Historical usage levels of "y'all"

What does all this data mean? What are the implications of these documented linguistic trends?

The trendy Texan tongue

For one, the results of this research seems to quell the prediction of naysayers who claim the Texan accent and dialect will soon go extinct or become irrelevant (Cohen). Rather than going away, the distinct speech of the Lone Star State will likely be with us for a long time. Or, at the very least, many of the dialect's most well-known terms will not be purged from Texans' vocabularies and publications anytime soon.

Has the increasing popularity of Texan English been documented by any linguistic experts? Or could the trends catalogued by Google be the result of some inconsequential fluke?

Actually, in recent years, a number of linguistic experts have noticed and described the Texan Dialect phenomenon, agreeing that the Texan tongue is possibly more popular now than ever before. In fact, University of Texas at San Antonio linguistics professor Guy Bailey believes the speech of the Lone Star State is in fact now "trendy" across many socioeconomic groups—particularly among young Texans (Neuliep).

> **"The Texas accent is actually spreading. Bailey discovered that the use of the flattened vowel sound that makes 'night' sound like 'naht'—a key marker of the Texas twang—is expanding across all socioeconomic groups, most dramatically among people who are thirty and younger. Just as surprising, in an era when media saturation and urban living are the norm, regional phrases like 'y'all' and 'fixin to' are becoming more popular among Texans, not less (Colloff)."**

Why do people like speaking Texan? Some experts suggest the answer is quite simple: Texans who like Texas will speak Texan.

"'Y'all' and 'fixin' to' were also spreading fast among newcomers within the state, [linguistic experts found], particularly those who regard Texas fondly," *The New York Times* reported (Blumenthal). "Use of the flat 'I,' they found, also correlated strikingly to a favorable view of Texas."

"[I]n Texas more than elsewhere, how you talk says a lot about how you feel about your home state," *The Times* continued.

Bailey, the linguistics professor, noticed the same phenomenon about residents of Texas, as reported by PBS.

> **"Bailey was intrigued to find that those who described the state as an 'excellent' place to live were five times more likely to use monopthongs as residents who characterized it as 'poor.' Of course, people who are proud to be Texan are proud to talk like Texans" (Colloff, Drawl or Nothin').**

According to these indicators, one thing is abundantly clear: Texans like their language. And so, from all indications, Texan English—including its recognizable pronunciation twang and iconic lexicon—will remain popular and well-used for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion: implications for composition

Few English dialects are as distinct, as commonly ridiculed, and as utterly fascinating as Texan English. In many ways, the well-documented Texas dialect—with its laid-back cadence, carefree drawl, and unusual pronunciations—represents the Lone Star State's character quite well. Then, the Texas lexicon, featuring a few bizarre yet iconic terms, is evidently becoming increasingly popular as the state grows in population and influence.

Perhaps one reliable indicator of an educated Texan is the ability to purge one's speech of the Texas dialect, and to similarly cleanse one's writing of goofy colloquial terms like "might could" and "howdy." Perhaps an inverse relationship exists between a person's perceived intelligence and the conspicuousness of his linguistic background. Perhaps a truly knowledgeable Texan does not sound much like a Texan at all.

And yet, at its best, is not composition a reflection of the writer? A manifestation of the author's emotions, ideals, and, yes, language? Does not a truly talented writer communicate not just his message, but also himself? Don't one's specific choice of words and diction convey more meaning and depth than the words themselves?

Perhaps the more obvious the dialect, the more accurate the composition. Perhaps the inner Texan should not be masked or concealed, but rather manifested. Perhaps the occasional Texan English expression adds a new dimension to composition that is unattainable otherwise. At least that's a thought we *might could* consider.

Works Cited

Bailey, Guy. *Texan English*. n.d. Web. 8 May 2015.

> <http://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/texa
> n/>.

Blumenthal, Ralph. "Scholars of Twang Track All the 'Y'Alls' in

> Texas." *The New York Times* 28 November 2003. Web.

> <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/28/national/28TWAN.h

> tml?pagewanted=1>.

Charles, Dan. *Google Book Tool Tracks Cultural Change With

> Words*. 16 December 2010. Web. 8 May 2015.

> <http://www.npr.org/2010/12/16/132106374/google-book-

> tool-tracks-cultural-change-with-words>.

City-Data.com. "Accent Map."" n.d. Web.

Cohen, Jason. "Goodbye To Y'all That." *Texas Monthly* 27

> September 2012. Web.

> <http://www.texasmonthly.com/story/goodbye-

> y%E2%80%99all>.

Colloff, Pamela. "Drawl or Nothin'." *Texas Monthly* June 2003.

> Web. <http://www.texasmonthly.com/content/drawl-or-

> nothin?fullpage=1>.

—. *Drawl or Nothin'*. n.d. Web. 8 May 2015.

<http://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/texa
n/drawl/>.

Crystal, David. *English as a global language: second edition*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Web.
<http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/samples/cam041/2003282119.p
df>.

"Dialects: Regional Varieties of English." n.d. Web.

Google. *Google Books Ngram Viewer: blue norther*. n.d. 2015. 8
May 2015.
<https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=blue+no
rther&year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smo
othing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cblue%20norther
%3B%2Cc0>.

—. *Google Books Ngram Viewer: fixin to*. n.d. Web. 8 May 2015.
<https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=fixin+to
&year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothin
g=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cfixin%20to%3B%2Cc
0>.

—. *Google Books Ngram Viewer: howdy*. n.d. Web. 8 May 2015.

    <https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=howdy&

    year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing

    =3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Chowdy%3B%2Cc0>.

—. *Google Books Ngram Viewer: might could*. n.d. Web. 8 May

    2015.

    <https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=might+c

    ould&year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smo

    othing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cmight%20could

    %3B%2Cc0>.

—. *Google Books Ngram Viewer: y'all*. n.d. Web. 8 May 2015.

    <https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=y%27all

    &year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothin

    g=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cy%27all%3B%2Cc0>

    .

Hinrichs, Lars. *Welcome to the Texas English Project*. n.d. Web. 8

    May 2015. <http://dsbigham.net/texasenglish/index.html>.

Jha, Alok. "Google creates a tool to probe ''genome' of English

    words for cultural trends." *The Guardian* 16 December

    2010. Web.

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/2010/dec/16/google-

tool-english-cultural-trends>.

Michel, Jean-Baptiste, et al. "Quantitative Analysis of Culture

Using Millions of Digitized Books." *Science* (2010): 176-

182. Web.

<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/331/6014/176.full>.

Neuliep, James W. *Intercultural communication: a contextual*

approach. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.,

2015. Web.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=xkoXBAAAQBAJ&p

g=PA274&dq=texan+english+y%27all&hl=en&sa=X&ei=

Da4_VcvnFMe9sAXx9ICoDQ&ved=0CEoQ6AEwBg#v=

onepage&q=texan%20english%20y'all&f=true>.

Rigsbee, Ken. *What Makes You Thank Teksuns Tawk Funny?* n.d.

Web. 8 May 2015.

<http://www.qsl.net/w5www/textalk.html>.

Ronen, Shahar, et al. "Links that speak: The global language

network and its association with global fame." *Proceedings*

of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of

America (2014): E5616–E5622. Web.

<http://www.pnas.org/content/111/52/E5616.full.pdf>.

University of Wisconsin: Wilwaukee. *Dialect Survey Results:*

 TEXAS. n.d. Web. 8 May 2015.

 <http://www4.uwm.edu/FLL/linguistics/dialect/staticmaps/

 state_TX.html>.

Walters, Keith. *Dialects*. 12 June 2010. Web. 8 May 2015.

 <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pcd01>.