

Perceptions of Durham Region English

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“Perceptions of the Greater Toronto Area’s Multilingualism” is an ongoing dialectology project conducted by undergraduate geography students at the University of Toronto. As the name suggests, this study uses folk or perceptual dialectology.

This type of dialectology, most often associated with Dennis Preston, polls respondents for their dialect impressions. Preston’s first experiments had participants outline regional dialects on maps, rate regional dialects along pleasantness, correctness, and linguistic distance / intelligibility scales, and determine the residence location of prerecorded speakers, much in the vein of George Bernard Shaw’s Professor Henry Higgins. Students in this new GTA project can also ask other perception questions, such as their participants’ impressions of the number of speakers of different language communities in a specific locality.

The first phase of the project, conducted in October 2004, focuses on the easternmost part of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the Region of Durham. This paper is a summary of the findings of those students who elected to work with either participants whose first language is Canadian English or who focused their inquiries on the Canadian English spoken by Durham Region residents. In a past pilot project, factors such as sex, age, length of regional residence, and first language have shown to be correlates with people’s language impressions of this reputedly multicultural and multilingual area. Many findings are compared to actual Statistics Canada data.